OTHER WORLDS SCIENCE STORIES

THE FALL OF LEMURIA

By RICHARD S. SHAVER

November 1949 35c

FIRST ISSUE

WHERE NO FOOT WALKS by G. H. IRWIN

VENUS TROUBLE SHOOTER by JOHN WILEY

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EDITORIAL

MAY WE introduce ourselves? We are the magazine you have been looking for. Our title is OTHER WORLDS *Science Fiction;* our owner is *Clark Publishing Company;* our editor is *Robert N. Webster.* And all three of us intend to do our best to give you the finest in science fiction.

A FEW WORDS about *our policy.* Every magazine, it seems, has to have a policy. It's a sort of standard to be adhered to. It's a statement of what the magazine is to contain. We'll try to put that in five words; our policy is *science fiction at its best.* Your editor has been acquainted with science fiction since 1923 when he first read the complete works of Jules Verne, H. Rider Haggard and H. G. Wells. So he realizes that when he says "at its best," those three words cover a lot of ground. So, let's try to explain just what we mean by the *best* science fiction. Let's take the magazine called *Astounding Science Fiction:* we've read it for a long time, and we've enjoyed a great many of its stories. We like its editor, John W. Campbell, and we think he's tops when it comes to putting up-to-the-minute science in the stories in his magazine. He can weave a powerful scientific punch into a story, and he's always careful to be 100% accurate in his science data. We like that, and we know you do too. So, you'll get at least one story each issue of OTHER WORLDS which we might call the *best* ASF type. If you'll glance at the contents page you'll see "The Miracle Of Elmer Wilde" by Rog Phillips. We think this story is a good policy starter for this kind of story—but it's only a starter. You can be sure it's no indication of how much better they'll be after you readers tell us what writers and themes you want in future issues. You'll have to do that, you know—we intend to give you what *you* want, not what the *editor* wants.

Next, let's take Ray Palmer's *Amazing Stories.* Here's a magazine we cut our eye-teeth on. It's given us countless hours of pleasure, and quite a few surprises. You might call it a trail-blazer in the science fiction field. Well, we intend to blaze a few trails ourselves, though we don't know exactly what they'll be yet; but in this issue we are presenting an author we think made the greatest stir science fiction has ever seen—we are presenting a story by Richard S. Shaver. It's called "The Fall Of Lemuria" and it really isn't a story at all; it's more a series of loosely connected incidents, but it contains some very good material in the straight science fiction vein.

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Mr. Shaver, as some of you well know, puts a certain verisimilitude into his writing and in all sincerity, claims it is not entirely fiction. We don't take any stand on that. We only present the best in every phase of science fiction, and Richard S. Shaver is undoubtedly best in his own field. Our cover depicts one of Mr. Shaver's creations, and with imagination like that, you must admit an artist can go to town. We've had a talk with Mr. Shaver, and we think we'll have something pretty fine from him for future issues.

Then how about *Planet Stories?* We read it, too, and we enjoy many of its action, adventure type yarns. So, we asked Mr. G. H. Irwin to do us an action story on another planet, and he came up with "Where No Foot Walks." We think you'll enjoy this one and it will serve as an example of that phase of our policy.

The other two stories in this issue we find it hard to classify. Perhaps *Thrilling Wonder Stories* or *Startling Stories* might feature "Venus Trouble Shooter" by John Wiley; and perhaps only OTHER WORLDS would publish "Seven Come A-Lovin' " by Craig Browning—it's a combination of humor and super-science.

All comparisons being made, we admit that we are the newest science fiction magazine on the American scene, and we nod with respect to our older companions. But—and this is a promise—we intend to beat each one at its own game by giving the readers of OTHER WORLDS *exactly* what they *want* in the way of science fiction, and your editor knows you'll tell him what that is, specifically, in your letters to him. In general terms, he already knows what you want—the *best* of each type of science fiction being published today.

Actually, we won't have a policy until you readers make it for us.

OTHER WORLDS is the second of our little family of magazines, FATE being the first. If you have not seen FATE yet, we suggest that you visit your newsstand and pick up a copy. It isn't a fiction magazine, since it publishes only factual articles — but they are articles you readers of OTHER WORLDS ought to enjoy; they are the sort of thing Charles Fort would have liked.

OTHER WORLDS is the science fiction magazine for *everybody*. Laymen and scientists; fans and just readers; gals as well as guys; you and I and us. Its size is handy; its wordage more than most, 72,000. It will have the best stories that money can buy and the best editing that twenty-six years of experience can give it.

And we're delighted to meet you!—*Robert N. Webster.*

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THE FALL OF LEMURIA

by RICHARD S. SHAVER

For ages man has had memories of dead civilizations so vague that he has called them myths. Here is a story which suggests that not only were there such races, but that survivors still inhabit the earth!

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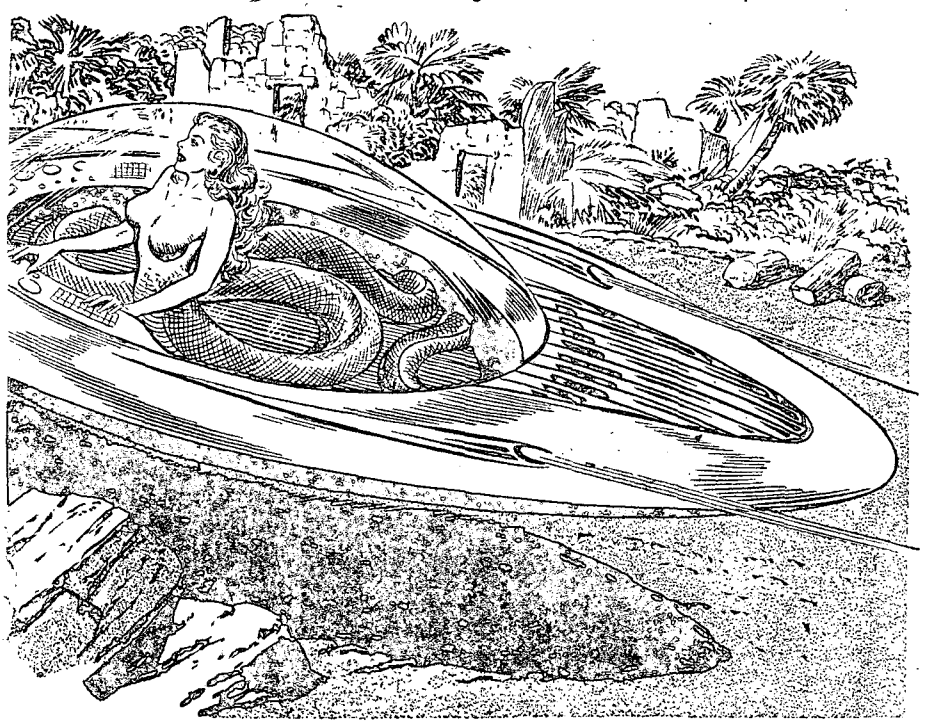
THIS is a re-statement of a lost history of our planet, fragmentary, muddled in spots, baffling, containing unsaid implications so startling as to be incredible, yet impossible to dismiss from an open and reasonable mind. It may be illusion, madness; but if it is, then how sane are *you*? What do we really know of the past beyond recorded history? If there *was* such a past, you say, then why do not vestiges of it remain today: in language, in mythology, in ancient ruins? Ah, but they do remain! And I intend to point them out to you. If, when I have finished, you are not convinced, then, of course, this is fiction—to *you*. To me it is the truth. I believe it. To say otherwise would indeed be a fiction. But do not let me press my own opinions upon you; rather, let me try only to entertain you. What your own opinions will be, having read what I have to say, may be surprising. Now, however, make your mind a blank. Erase from it all preconceived ideas. Begin with empty space before the earth was. Erect only, a clean, white mental screen upon which I can write my word pictures; fragmentary, disconnected, with ill-

Maiya gazed in shocked sorrow: where her lovely home had been now roamed wild hogs; great jungle killer jaguars stalked; huge condors roosted in the topmost towers . . .



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constructed continuity, so that you receive it just as I had to receive it, just as I learned the story from all sources, some strange and unbelievable, some not so strange. For this is not a story, but a history, with gaps that I cannot fill in, and which can never be filled in, to my way of thinking. Too much has been irretrievably and tragically lost. And some of it that I do know, I do not understand . . .

RICHARD S. SHAVER

* * *

Endless swirl of vortice into matter; the birth of planet balls in the soft womb of wide darkness; the stately flight of the undying beings called Gods through that womb of Mother Night, the immortal ether.

Avoiding star trails, flinging their world-ships forever along the darkest paths of deep space; spreading their seed, their mighty children, ever wider across the sweet black face of Night, where Age is not.

Onward they plow, building ever more ecstatic fabric into their homes of everlasting delight, the infinite skill of an age-old mechanical science making easy their way, seeding the darkness. Harrow and drill and seed; planting civilizations on dark planets as men plant mustard seed in fields.

But some seeds fall among thorns: planets lost in the bright abandoned deserts of sunlight, the deadly gamma rays of atomically flaming worlds whose matter is disrupting.

Such seeds are we — you and I and the women we worship—condemned so soon to wither into age and decay because of the sun, to become an ugly, rotting nothing beneath the sod. Yes, though trapped in Death, immersed in Life-destroying radioactivity, we on Earth still contain the seeds of that immortal life that lives in the ether's darkness. We are the lost children of the Gods!

* * *

It all began because I broke my leg.

If I hadn't been forced to stay in the hospital, I would never have picked up the old Bible and started looking for traces of the source of the mechanisms that made the voices.

It was the only thing there was to read. I had always puzzled about the real meaning of the *Mene, mene, tekel upharsin* written on the wall by a hand without a body. You remember, it was Nebuchadnezzar's palace . . .

Puzzling about what strange tongue it might be, I began to conjecture where it *must* have come from, what it *must* have been. I ruled out mysticism, angels, and other forms of fantasy, and stuck to things I knew personally were actually true, supported by observable and known facts, things I felt were self evident. To make it possible for a hand to appear without a body—a hand writing in an unknown tongue—indicated concealed devices and personalities of a training beyond anything Babylon had to offer.

That deduction made it a *must* for a greater race to have inhabited the world in past time unknown

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to recorded races, for such science to have been active about old Neb's palace. I began to conjecture how it *must* have been able to remain concealed in gigantic caverns where the writing of that Elder Race still was spoken and written by hidden dwellers in long forgotten caverns. They had to be underground; there was no other place for them.

I began to wonder how *they* would build a language if they went about it, a Universal tongue, simple enough for use by many divergent groups of races.

I spent that winter working out that language from pure deduction, and I hit the nail on the head. For, each letter that has come down to us stood then for a basic actuality in nature. For instance V stood for "vital" or sex appeal; K meant "kinetic" or motion; D was "disintegrance" or breaking down, etc. After a while I had a working language key and I correctly translated *Mene Tekel Upharsin* for perhaps the first time!

I was right, for the hidden people in their cavern world whom I had deduced told me so, when, leaning back with a self-satisfied air, I said:

"All right, I know you're there, you might as well admit it."

They did admit it. They knew there was no longer any reason to conceal themselves from me, for I knew! They had written *Mene Tekel* on Nebuchadnezzar's walls from that same silence, and now they were watching me while I translated, so many centuries after! That was the most delayed message man ever received!*

Below that Newfoundland hospital they had probably assisted my stumbling deductions along the paths they should follow. I know that now, though I gave myself all the credit then.

It was then they began the long series of teachings which have told me of that world of the past which was so far ahead of our own as not to be comparable. Most of the teachings came from wire recordings so marvelously realistic and so ancient as to be unbelievable. They said they had vast libraries of these wire records, and played them back to me by means of a mysterious telepathy, mechanically augmented so that I could hear it. These I give you now, the story of the Elder Race on Earth. It begins properly with the story of the race that was the Elder race to the Elder race of our Earth — their forebears . . .

* * *

The great *planetquest,* our quest for a broad steading for all our numbers through space, was in truth a flight from disaster.

We were the rear guard of the race fleets. Many endless years we had trailed the flight of the fleets, scenting with our augmentive rays the minute traces of their passing. A sensitive mind, a reaching conductive ray, an augmentive set of rex tubes—and there is little that one misses in the emptiness of the void.

*Mene Tekel Upharsin — Man's energy source is in the force of motion (kinetic energy) and you humans are made by a power that comes from the sun.

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Then too, we had the course, and a battery of our best minds hooked to each other with telepathic rays, watching the stars spin slowly past and change their constellations and relations, checking the new formed combinations with the charts.

But, near Orphad, a great and malevolent star, we drove into a vast cloud of detrimental ions. Before we could switch out our perceptor rays, into our brains smashed the deadly energy from the disrupting ions. Our neurals wove together in incomprehensible stupidity. There was no reason in us, no sensitivity to pick our way through the myriad trails of the ether, no way to see where lay the path of our fore-runners, for now we had absorbed the intent toward disillusion and despair!

We knew still a great deal. Our ship was filled with the influx of the stupefying energy, and we knew that for us the race had passed on. For us was left only a desperate attempt to win free of this vast space sea of deadly energy into which we had plunged so blindly into *blindness itself*. Easy to understand why we had to escape the insidious increase of that influence which had made us so blind!

But only to win free, to jet on and on toward some clean area of space—never again to see our people, our own cities. Our way of life was gone! We were caught up by Fate in some other path. We were *de!*

Stupid we were, and knew it not, to give up the search for the plain trail left us to follow, but there is no understanding the stupidity given a man by an influx of disintegrant ions into his mind. We had been hooked up so closely, following with many intertuned mental perceptions the vague scent of the passage of a myriad of ships —so many and so long before— that the inrush of deadly radiation along our beams had left us all with a pretty complete set of spoiled mind films. Our memories were dim and distorted, and our thinking angry and of a despairing kind. We saw no use in living, and thus found our way out of the deadly tide, only to fall into senseless arguments, even into actual physical clashes, on what course to take.

Of sense there was still much, but where there is magnetic error in the thinking mechanism, knowledge of the error's presence is little help. The error works out no matter how one checks the logic on paper, with mathematics. It will come out in misdirection. There is no way of avoiding the falling into the paths of such error. De tides are like that, and few survive their first immersion in their denser coils in space. We survived, we flew on, but we knew that for us life would never be the same — never really *life!*

Eventually we picked a green planet, beneath a new sun of clean fields, and set down our ships to try our limbs in walking on earth again. Weak were our legs, hah!

For twelve years we had not touched soil, and for four of those years we had fought to clear the

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flank of the race fleet from the dogged pursuit of the Demad legions. It was their appearance among the planets of our home galaxy which had determined the Elders upon the long search for a space area clear of all Demoniac life.

For four years we had had to battle madmen, organized legions of killers, trained in unending space battles to a savagery and tenacity beyond belief—the degenerate descendants and leavings of some once wonderful culture—descending upon us out of the Hell-swarm of some planet group where increasing de tides had scoured away all reason and left only de mad minds; to battle suicidal madmen equipped with superior ships, for four long years of flight, that the race might survive!

And then to lose their trail through some stupidity of failing to note the needles that show always on the big red master dial the de tides flowing ahead! How could we have missed it?

But in such flight there are the merest fractions of a second to note such details, and someone had failed to watch the board for an instant and see the madness dead ahead.

Now we knew we could never rejoin our race! Even if we knew where they were, we could never go to them. For now *we* were what the Demad legions had been, men infected with a growing insanity of anger and evil and fear. Errors of logic would lead inevitably, now, to conflicting interests. And any child of a clean race knows that men's interests can *never* conflict, for they are identical and therefore parallel!

Yet, when the magnetic fields of the mind cells are deluged with de energies, the mind insists that the interests of men are conflictual, insists until men find themselves at each other's throats.

We saw it coming—in the angry excited speeches and squabbling in our off-duty watches. We saw it in the group of some two hundred ships who suddenly deserted us and took their own divergent path.

But what can reason and sanity do with pure unreason? There is no existing predictional table that can tell or explain what angle of peculiar intent false logic will take next!

When the fleet lifted again from the green planet, our own fellows of the ship *Darethra* found some trouble in the grav-gens. She would not lift!

We were tired, and we knew some mad slaughter might break out—would surely break out—between the divergent factions forming in the fleet. As if it mattered from whom the orders came, so long as they were good orders. But they were having "political" arguments, blows were thrown with bare fists into friend's faces—madness, madness!

We remained, though our ship was fit enough—two hundred men tried in each other's company for twelve long years. At least we could not distrust each other, even in madness.

Two hundred men — and not long after the fleet had lifted, two

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more ships settled to the green plains near ourselves, the *Endra* and the *Dond!*

I laughed, for our captain's sweetheart was the first mate aboard the *Dond,* and her friend who was Rex equipment operator aboard the *Endra* had always set her eye on me. But one is in no hurry when one lives a thousand years. I wondered how long we would live now, filled with disintegrating atoms and sub-atoms?

The *Endra* and the *Dond* were female battle-wagons. Among the Eld, our own race, women go to war as well as men, but the sexes are separated, for they worry too much about each other when in danger. It decreases the strain of battle not to have your very truest love in plain sight when under fire. There was much rivalry between the female and the male crews, and between battalions and other groupings, each sex seeking to demonstrate once and for all which sex is superior. They had never quite succeeded, somehow, in proving it either way.

Friendly rivalry, from which we all derived a lot of fun. That was before the day of the Demad invasion. We could have fought them off, but it was not worth it. Their very existence told our scientists that the whole area of our planetary system was becoming infected with the nearing tides of life-blighting disintegrance. So it was hardly worth fighting for. Our loved homes we abandoned to them, took off in peaceful surrender of the whole Lantic group of planets.

Too abject, it seemed to the Demad rulers. So they sent their fleets after us. To enslave such arrant cowards seemed to them a simple task.

But we taught them differently! It was the need to delay their pursuit till our space-spanning speed built up that kept our own ships from following the trail until it was faint, so faint we mistook the way and crashed into the flood of —stupidity!

Now, I stood beneath a great beech tree, watching the *Endra* settle to her landing on the tall tufted grass of the plain. We named the plain the Delaware, for it was there we learned to be aware of *Del,* life under the taint of detrimental. D and L and aware, the Delaware.*

Out of her came the two hundred tall warrior maids, proud and laughing and a little shy. For none of us had had much contact with the other sex in the past twelve Yar. There had been visits from ship to ship, parties, but this was something else.

All of us knew we were facing a new pioneer life, without the resources of the wisdom of our ancient race at hand in minds of living Elders. They had gone on to a clean area—and we would not follow if we could, for now we were an infected and apt to madden group of people who could

*If the reader wishes to consult the ancient meanings of the entire alphabet, they are given in a table at the end of this story. The tables will help, also, in understanding the meanings of Elder words used in this story.—*Editor.*

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only bring trouble to their loved race.

We were on our own, and our desertion from the others dictated by a greater awareness of the doom of approaching madness that was coming for all of us unless we planned ways of avoiding the worst effects of error in our minds. I think we all realized that our main purpose must be such a plan, for a way of life in which we could avoid all friction leading to deadly conflict in the future. Some way of applying our ancient laws of logic toward a smooth working *life-tic* must be worked out. Some way of establishing a colony here, where we could weather the gradually building impact of false logic upon our future.

That meant we knew we were settling here, in this unknown tiny system of planets, under this bright new sun, on this lush newly vegetating planet. A settler needs a wife, and these tall maids knew our minds, intuitively, as we all knew things in those days.

So it was an exciting and serious meeting of two hundred maids and two hundred men. But the same number of women now approaching from the *Dond*. Two women to each man! Then I laughed, because I knew my women. Somewhere out of sight, one more ship must be circling, preparing to land for a tryst planned ahead.

That would mean four hundred couples to begin the lost colony of the Lantic peoples here. It would always be the lost colony, I knew. Lost and determined to make the best of it. Just as I was determined to pick the best woman out of those four hundred for my own.

As if a man ever does the picking! My sweetheart was already winging toward me on swift feet, her arms extended, and all my plans dissolved in a rush of joy at sight of her face again. What face could ever be sweeter than hers? She was the best, I knew then — for me!

Her name was Mistip, but I always called her Misty. She was fifty and I was seventy. That was very young for marriage, but this was different. We all knew there would be no margin of time or of deference or tolerance in the error stricken minds we now carried on our necks. Not for flirtation or the endless courting and partying and transference of affection from one to the other that makes up the love life of the normal Eld citizen of marriageable age. In such proceedings there is too much room for jealousy, which was bound to come in our de infected condition.

Jealousy we knew only from our early teachings in the ways of demoniacs. But we knew those teachings were true, and that jealousy would rear its head and cause deaths among us now. So we were wed as quickly as might be, after a short betrothal. All of us married irrevocably, within the yar. Even so there were two near deaths in brawls over mates.

Thinking that way, all as one, the tale of four hundred marriages sounds like one man's thought; but we were used to thinking as one, in unison and agreement, toward a common end.

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Now each day took away a little of that agreement. We thought individually, as one, instead of as units of one great race animal.

Still we built, and thought, and planned and made of the Delaware valley a great garden for our little company of eight hundred.

Our ships we drew into great tunnels in the bedrock, and laid them up there until need arose. Our homes we drilled from the same rock, and overhead our plants flourished in orderly rows, all the many experimental plantings from which we would select the seed for next year's planting.

Now we learned the eating of meat, and strange and horrible it was to let the life-blood out of a deer. No harder thing I ever did than kill a sweet young fawn, that Misty and the child might eat.

Monotonous it was not, but hard in many ways after the luxury and the ease of Lantic cities. Yet there was a great thrill in planning our life-way, in knowing that what we were building would be our own, and not just inherited from the ancient work of our race.

So was the beginning.

* * *

Whatever the beginning, whether exactly as I have just outlined, Earth and her peoples grew, after that beginning, into one of the greatest of those space homes of titanic human-like life. That much I know for sure, the mightiest of space Gods has touched here, stayed here, built here.

I know this because even today our humble earth is called "The Great Tomb" because of the important residual "scientific" apparatus and machinery left here intact. It was and is called "The Great Tomb" because too, the people who lived here did not ever leave, as so many have thought (including myself). For the most part they *died in their tracks!*

That is why so very much of their possessions are still intact, because they left it exactly as they used it. *Was* still intact, I should say, for many centuries of ignorant and malevolent vandalism have destroyed the most valuable relics of Earth. Through the Halls of the Gods have trampled a horde of insane savages — no, not one horde, for century after century and war after war, those who passed were intent upon complete destruction.

Perhaps the greatest and most correct reason the great race died in their tracks and left their cavern homes in Earth complete with all equipment is this tale they tell of the great Demad legions of space, immortal madmen, gods who have become devils. These creatures, powerful beyond our concept, and insane beyond our imagination to picture the condition of illogic, have through the ages adopted as a custom the process of sending out vast armadas of space warships with the slogan: "The Heavens must be lit through the Alfier region. Dispel the darkness, cast the fire . . ."

Giving such orders, the Demad ruler sits back and watches his night sky—as afar his ships plunge on and on into dark spaces like our own "coal sack" and release

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upon the larger planets of eternal darkness, at intervals, great bombs of a kind of tremendously infectious atomic disintegration, like our own atom bomb, but completely capable of setting a whole planet afire in a twinkling, the atomic fire racing over the surface and transforming the dark body within short days into a burning sun. They watch stars set ablaze by their own orders, and they do this because they know that now the great men of the cold planets, the true Elder race, will leave the areas thus set afire, will depart rather than waste even one of their mighty and valuable citizens in a war against such madmen — and they must leave such dark planets at once the suns are set ablaze, to escape mortality and destructive madness from the de waves of such fires. They migrate ever farther away from the powerful rulers who set such heavenly conflagrations.

This battle of the planets, taking place over distances incredible, goes on and on, the de rulers ever striving to widen their control areas and take over the immensely valuable and luxurious caverns of the dark planet dwellers by driving them out with new sun blazes. The strategy is to get a bomb to a planet despite their alert and mighty patrols of ships. After that, they know that in a short time every true cold planet Elder human will flee from the disintegrance which distorts all true life into an evil and false pattern.

This is the great story of space. It is also the story of how the Elder race of Earth died in their tracks when the sun became a nova because of a bomb dropped before the sun *was* a sun. when it was only a dark planet.

* * *

The centuries passed, and the descendants of the original four hundred couples now number many millions. The face of the planet has been transformed, and the search for the path of the race of Eld been forgotten. Other planets have been colonized, but the new race has a vigorous love for the "mother" planet, now called Mu.

There are many surface buildings, but the great rock borings of their real homes and factories, deep in the safe bed rock, have been driven on and on. Now the whole planet is an under-network of tiered caverns.

Forests and farms cover all the surface except the poles. The rivers are held from floods by dikes which run along each side, rounded and tillable hills, really, which parallel the rivers everywhere.* In the forests, underbrush is nonexistent. There are only the mighty trunks and the soft leaf mold. Everywhere, nature is held in the firm control that is the life-science of Eld.

The new race call themselves Atlans, the great ocean is called Atlantic, (many other names from

*Anyone who has approached many rivers has remarked how it is always necessary to go *uphill* before descending into the river valley proper, as though Nature had provided natural walls to contain the river.—*Editor.*

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that time have survived *until today,* their origins forgotten, the memory destroyed by events and by active suppression of the Elder wisdom).

Their science, cut off from the supervision of the ancient masters of Eld, has taken some new angles. One of these is the variform technique of life production.

The minds of these people did not have our fixed viewpoint of man as a four-limbed animal, a standardized repetition of himself. They decided to try to produce a man more adapted to the new environment and to this end they produced a number of hybrids from the best seed obtainable. This had happened during the early stages of the race's growth on Mu, and the hybrids, those that had proved fertile and survived, had sired a number of strains of variant life forms.

Of these perhaps the most numerous were the Snake People, who have survived in legend. They settled the southern hemisphere almost to the Antarctic, which was in those days much more temperate. (It is generally held that the pre-diluvian poles were not at their present position, but the north pole was somewhere in North America around the present state of Kansas, the south pole in the latitude of Australia.)

They had also amphibious humans, calls Mers, or mermen. There were also those whose existence is most completely recalled by legend, the goat-legged Pan and his kind.

Arl, a girl of the latter group, was a student at the medical school in Tean city, a great underworld center of learning. Much of her collection of thought recordings still exist.

* * *

Arl of Atlan, descendant of Mistip, paused for a moment beside a pool in the culture forest to peer into the dreams in her own eyes. To peer at her own loveliness, to think her thoughts of life, to feel the kiss of the morning wetness on her feet, to scent the growth and to sense the fire of the light that was coming to make her world even brighter in its new freshness.

Arl, running her hands over her own sleek flanks, her serpent agile waist, touching her wrist where Mutan Mion had laid hold to keep her forever.

Arl, and the darting dragon-fly hanging for an instant to gaze into her dreaming eyes, the soft splash of the great frogs from before her unheeding feet, and the ripples widening on the mirror of the water. Ripples that torted the vision of her into idle magic, so that she put her hands to her hair to part and turn and plait, squatting on her softly mottled goat-footed legs to peer again at her self, beautiful and free and in love.

The image cleared and she leaned, staring into her mirror, looking for some sign of him still left in the wide eyes in the water, or on her pointed breasts or in the firm-set lips quizzically pondering the nature of love.

* * *

Arl is but a girl, and to the Eld race, youth is a brighter, more

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vital and *younger* thing than to us, who age so much faster. Her slim, active body is encased only in a transparent and glittering sheath of protective plastic. Her skin is not white, but a rosy pale purple. Her legs are a somewhat darker purple, mottled with pure white, and they end in a pair of cloven hoofs. She is a product of the variform technique of the birth laboratories, her family is a line of specially cultured humans whose seed has been altered by delicate microoperations to produce a more vigorous body, better adapted to the conditions of Earth life.

On her arm is a band with the medical school insignia, which was then as it is now: the caduceus and serpent. On her breast is the larger insignia of her own class in school, a man's figure struggling with the great snake, disease.

She sits now in school beside Mutan Mion, young student newly come to Tean City, listening to the bearded and horned Titan technicon medic:

"So it was that the race of Titans, sprung also from other ships lost from that migration of long ago, settled neighboring planets and eventually came into contact with the Atlan race."

His heavy voice seemed to conceal some emotion, some vague fear, as he went on in the exact syllogism of the technicon pedagogue.

"It is sad that so many of our ancestors lost contact with the original Eld, for if we had had the benefit of their knowledge of space and of the nature of suns, we would never have settled on orbs revolving about such an unstable body as our sun is fast becoming. Let me tell you why our sun is no longer to be trusted—has, in fact, never been a body that a wise astronomer of Eld would have picked for a source of warmth.

"Once that sun was a great cold ball, hanging desolate and frigid and unnoticed by any eye. Once it had been a mighty living planet, in some forgotten time. It had swung for an age around a dying sun that no life upon it ever saw, for it was covered with a heavy layer of dense clouds. The planet's forests, living in the dense dripping fogs for many ages, had deposited coal beds untold miles in depth, for no fire had ever touched them, the fog not allowing any fire to burn. (Venus is such a planet now, but much smaller.)

"So our sun hung, forgotten, a great ball sheathed in pure carbon, waiting for combustion to turn it into a source of heat.

"A meteor struck, huge enough to overcome the moisture of melted air and ice, and the fire spread. Not long after that event, the fleet of the great race of Eld passed by, and our forebears lost the path of the fleet, and came to these planets.

"Now a carbon fire is a clean fire, containing no dense elements. But when the whole surface of a major planet bursts into flame, then the more deadly fire of disintegrance begins in the depths, and if the core contains any elements but plain rock, you have in time a sun whose rays are detrimental to longevity in any life liv-

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ing under those rays. Such a sun was ours, not one to pick for long-continued colonization. It was madness and ignorance in our forebears which has doomed us to a battle that we are bound to lose, a battle against the increasing malevolence of our own sun.

"Only a few centuries ago, life was nearly ageless upon our Mother Mu. This planet was clean then of the thrown bits of disintegrance which are disastrous to all life."

Arl and Mutan Mion hung upon his words, for these were statements of facts and theories upon which the future of their people depended. It meant that this planet was not a feasible place any longer for life.

Mutan Mion rose to his feet.

"You mean that our sun has exhausted the original carbon shell, and has now become a sun of the Desun class? Then it must be set about with many space buoys to warn off travelers, and abandoned forever to the tides of de which it will create about itself!"

The teacher paused, eyed Mion closely.

"You are new here, and I suppose you have not yet heard of the projected migration of all Atlans, Titans and Variforms, of all human life, from the sun planets? It is so mighty a task, and the need so great and heartbreaking, the loss of everything our people have been building on these homes for all these centuries—all because the original colonists lacked a good knowledge of the nature of disintegrance. You see, they knew something of de; they had run into it in space, it had devastated their own home planets and caused the migration which brought them here. But they did not know that suns themselves were the real and only source of de, for their own original homes had been clean and dark, and this knowledge was not widespread. No, they did not know that this sun would begin to build about itself an increasingly detrimental ionic layer, a great potential force forever increasing, until it engulfed all its planets, one by one, in the ugly force that causes all degeneration."

* * *

I am a young man of Sub-Atlan of the State of Atlan, which is a loose federation of all the Lantic peoples.

I have been a student of painting under Artan Gro, who sent me to Tean City to the aged Titan teachers to learn the way of life needed to make me what he thinks I may become, a leader.

I have entered the Medicro schools there, in the company of Arl of the Ramen family, she of the quick goat feet and the plumed tail. I am a small man by Atlan standards, but to average humans I would be called a giant. My strong points are a certain practicality of viewpoint, a quickness of muscular coordination, the clean strong-limbed build of the pure Atlan race strain. My weak points are too numerous to mention. I have a sense of inferiority due to contact with the mighty older members of the race, and a lack of confidence in my own judgment.

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I have brown hair, greenish blue eyes, large square hands, a body too long for my legs. My clothes are scant, the caverns are warm. I wear a harness of soft leather, rather plain except for tooled designs, my one ornament a blue heron feather and ruby clasp in the telaug device I wear on my head. It looks like a cap of openwork leather. Nearly all of our race wear such a device. Oral conversation is used, but amplified with mental additions and explanations simultaneously.

Tonight I am taking Arl to a dance.

* * *

The dance had reached a peak of delight when Arl and Mion joined the couples on the floor. They were both terrifically aware of the stimulating electro-magnetic exd* flows mingled with the penetrative ions of nutrient chemicals, driven into their bodies by the sonic vibrations mingled invisibly with the musical sounds. The ionized air conducted the natural body electricity each to the other, making awareness of the other a vital and complete vision. They were also aware of the ecstatic bodies of all the other dancers.

Mion's arms held Arl, a bundle of vitality to which he was attuned and attached by invisible conductive radiants permeating the hall, synchronizing even his thoughts to her wish. As he lost himself in increasing and oblivious pleasure, that fear which had been a nagging undercurrent for so long became a deadly ray of blackness, searching through the throng for a victim . . .

Struck — and through all the complete awareness of the ecstatic throng ran a terrible wave of augmented terror which each young mind picked up and added to and transmitted with its own added quantity of augmentation.

The victim was a horned young giant of the Titans.

The dying young Titan, writhing with the terrible pain of a ray that was burning out his insides, was the first man Mion had ever seen killed. The smell of the burning flesh, the terrible sorrow and loss that struck at his sensitized mind as he realized the potential value of a cultured son of the mighty Titan teachers to the race, the sheer crude vandalism in the wanton murder there before the throng of dancing, carefree Atlans, sickened him.

With his last living effort, the tortured young human pointed out with one smoking arm the path along which the deadly ray came. But no guard ray flicked on to short out the deadly energy. As the whole crowd realized this truth, a concerted rush for the entrances began. It was unheard of, that the rodite* ray should be unmanned!

*Exd is an Atlan abbreviation for ex-disintegrance or energy ash. It is the principal content of the beneficial vibrants. It is the space dust from which all matter grows into being.—*Author.*

*Ro is mental force. To ro you is to make you do things against your will. A large generator of thought impulse can be set up to ro a whole group of people. Row

(Footnote concluded on next page)

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The forty foot body of a serpent woman glided to the fallen young Titan, cradling the dead and already horrible young head in her arms, tears on her cheeks. Incongruous to any but an Atlan was that race love, that *realization* of the terrible social condition that could allow such a murder, on the snake woman's face! Mion felt to the core of his young soul the truth of his teacher's words: "It was madness and ignorance in our forebears that has doomed us to a battle that we must inevitably lose, against the increasing malevolence of our own sun."

* * *

My name is Artan Gro. I am a teacher of art in the city of Sub-Atlan. One of the hardest things I ever did was to laugh young student, Mutan Mion's aspirations into despair—and one of the most intelligent acts of my life. He was not cut out for sublimation—his mind was one to cut through to needed action.

It was I who dialed the number of young Arl of Ramen and told her to watch out for Mion and set his feet upon the path of learning. She followed my instructions to the letter, and kept me informed of his progress.

Painting the nude, with stim* rays to increase the erotic impulse and effect the necessary sublimation of the impulses into steady creation of art form, is to me the greatest expression of value in life. But I have the good sense to know that a society staggering on the brink of chaos cannot afford to develop artists from leaders, or to make dilettantes out of engineers; and Mion had the mind that cuts to the core of things, the genius for simplicity and truth, a natural leader. I had noted the gradual degeneration overtaking my people, and though I love art, I could not contribute to that degeneration by allowing even one young men to take a path that would make of him a less creative person than nature intended. And Mion was no artist.

My good wife, Lady Lila, who is also my model upon occasion (possibly to keep my mind from straying, and possibly because she loves me), was the intuitive match-maker

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(Footnote concluded from page 17)
the boat now means physical force, not mental force. Ro the people was an ancient method of government, in which all the people thought along ro guided lines. The name of such government was "romantic." Ro (controlled) man (man) tic (science). It is the same concept as used by some scientists when they say "hypnotically conditioned." It is not necessarily an evil government. Any person who is ro is weaker than the mental impulses about him. Rodites are the workers who tend the guard rays, and are "slaves" in a sense that they are ro to absolute loyalty, and therefore mentally incapable of treachery. Literally translated, a rodite is a "life pattern synchronizer.—*Richard S. Shaver.*

*Stim rays mechanically augment every cell impulse to a power untold. It seems that every tree carries a beautiful face; every breeze is like a bath in elixir; every sensation of sex has the value of a thousand nights of love. It is a mechanical way of accentuating every possible pleasure. Even reading a book becomes an emotional experience of high caliber.—*Richard S. Shaver.*

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who suggested we let Arl know the innocent young Mion was headed toward the temptations of Tean City. I have never been allowed to forget how successful our finagling turned out for all concerned.

As I look back upon the tremendous changes that have occurred since that day I sent young Mion packing, to become the very vessel and conduit to bring the forces that caused those changes, I congratulate myself and my own dark Gods upon their foresight.

Let me play the thought records collected for me by Arl of the family of Ramen and Mistip, saved for me through all that hazardous time. I like to think this was her way of rewarding me for directing her to the value of Mion. I will start with Maiya's thoughts —Maiya, the serpent woman who saved her people. Her story is important because it involved all the southern hemisphere of Mu.

* * *

I am Maiya of the Snake People. I am she who saw her beloved struck down by the mad rays at the dance. For long years I had kept the young Titan at arm's length, though I loved him too. I thought it was too alien a match for his love to last, that some woman more like him in appearance would take him from me in the end. Would that I could have foreseen that my self denial should cost him his only chance for happiness before his death!

It was through him that I first met Mutan Mion and his Arl of the plumed tail and goatish legs. He had taken me to Arl's apartment to show me that such dissimilar bodies could overlook their differences in genuine love. After her departure with Mion *(in that flight into space that became a triumphant return with the war fleets of the Nortan federation)* I myself left Tean City, and journeyed southward to the great cities where dwell only those whose blood has been combined in a curious admixture with the reptilian strain. We of the Serpent People are not so conscious of our differences from the other nations of the Atlan peoples in ordinary times—but now, under the stress of this postponement of the migration away from our sun in the face of the obvious break-up of Atlan government, I wanted to do my part to warn my people not to depend upon the Central government in Tean City, not to depend upon the central council in Sub-Atlan. I wanted to wake them up, to migrate themselves to a new and cleaner environment before the evil that had slain my lover, that I knew was about to engulf all the people of these Northern cities of four-limbed Atlans, engulfed them too in destruction.

And I was successful!

We of the Snake People have arms, shoulders and torso similar to four-limbed Atlans. But from the waist down we have the body of a python, so that we do not walk, but glide upon our bellies. Our skins are whiter than other races, due to some reptilian determinant. We cannot stand so much sunlight as the darker skinned races. Our scales, below

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the waist, are green with narrow red and yellow patterns. These patterns are different, and among us serve to indicate the family, for they are the same in relatives of the same family groups. We originated in laboratory experiments undertaken long ago to combine the strongest features of reptilian life with the best features of human life. We are slower of growth than humans, but much longer lived; and few ordinary diseases of mankind have any effect upon us; we are immune. Our longer life gives our mentality longer to mature, so that our greatest members are mightier scientists than those of ordinary Atlan blood. We are a proud people, very beautiful, and virtue is a fetish with us. We are hairless. Along our backs and up to the center of the forehead runs a row of short spines, culminating in a crest upon the forehead, this crest is ordinarily spread over the skull, but in excitement or activity the crest rises, forming a crown of spines with a web between of fine-scaled serpent skin. This crowning serpent crest is one of the proudest ornaments, and its lack betokens a serpent human from a racial stock of some other strain. The greatest of our families, the mightiest of our historic heroes, are always pictured with this crest erect.

I, through some accident of throw-back to the human genes, do not have this crest, but have instead a head of silver hair, of which I am ashamed when among the Serpent People, but of which I am rather proud when among humans of normal appearance.

I have an extremely high intelligence quotient, and was sent by my family to Tean City to study under the superior medical experts there. I know many ancient secrets known only to my own people, who came to Earth separately from the first Atlans, and later joined with them in the Federation.

Tonight I attended a dance with the young son of my Titan pedagogue, who has fallen in love with me. I was very interested when Arl of the goat legs and Mutan Mion appeared on the dance floor, for I had decided to watch this couple to determine if such dissimilar mates can remain in love and be happy. That would decide me in considering the suit of the young horned Titan for my hand in marriage.

* * *

The Serpent People, whose origins are lost in the antiquity of far space voyagings, may in truth be a true race, and not a product of any clumsier hand than Nature's own. No one knows, any more. They claim a greater antiquity than even the Titan's who came to Earth after the Atlan's settlement, and look upon most other races as "young" races. Certain it is that their cities betray an alien beauty, a glory of age-long development of the art faculty, and their customs and peculiar cults and religions have nothing whatever in common with ordinary Atlan beliefs and teachings.

Many of their cities are on the surface, set among the wild moun-

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tains of what is now South America, then called Serpena. Beneath these glorious towers and arching fairy bridges, of course, the network of living caverns reach on and on through the safer bed-rock of the planet. But the Serpent People are enamoured of surface forests, of wild rocky scenery, and often set their cities among the most impossible of crags and on the brink of some bottomless abyss, anchoring them with their machine art, giving them trusses and bases of everlasting but rock-like plastics. Across some wild abyss their slender spans reach and reach again, weaving a spiderweb of strange beauty, always wholly in keeping with the wild natural scenery of their site.

When the Elders of the Serpent race first began to notice the growing deviations of emotional instability which heralded the increasing malevolence of the sun, they took steps to safeguard their citizens from its worst effects by abandoning the surface cities, forbidding any citizen to remain above ground for more than a few days at a time.

Maiya, who had taken her own atmosphere flyer for the journey from Tean City to her home, flew over these empty abandoned husks, sorrowfully musing on the symptoms of decay already apparent. No banners flew from the towers to announce that the dwellers were at home to callers, no sound arose from those spiraling streets, no light burned. Here and there some jungle plant had sprung from wind-blown seed, had reared an upstart head of fern-like plumes, or twined a vandal climbing hand into the masonry, and everywhere were the clouds of birds now making the cities their homes. The great condors roosted on the topmost towers, buzzards and hawks spiraled lower down, pigeons and parakeets swung in phalanx or brawled in riotous combat.

Through the streets roamed wild hogs; a great jungle killer stalked the flanks of the herd; a jaguar crouched along the roof gutters of a once lovely home.

To Maiya's homesick eyes, which had last looked upon these scenes when they flashed with gem-like night lanterns, swarmed with brilliant festivities, nested innumerable flying craft, these desolate scenes were heartrending.

She settled her lone flyer among the others before the pillars of the Intram, went in along the deserted ticket windows, down the stairs to the beginning of the tracks. Traffic had ceased, she saw, but single coaches had been detached and waited there, motors humming, to carry any passenger to the depths where the Serpent People had withdrawn. Maiya wondered what they expected to gain beside putting off the day when they must entirely abandon Earth?

Maiya busied herself, alone in the speeding car, with rubbing a light volatile cleaning oil upon her scales. Soon her forty foot length of reptilian beauty gleamed with a metallic lustre, each scale a flashing gem of brilliant color. Then she combed her long silver hair till it shone in soft waves about her

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high cheek-boned face, darkened her lashes and eye-brows, touched her cheeks with color.

The car swept out into the vast dome of the Intramend, which formed the circular focus of tunnel rail tubes from every part of the world. Straight as a string, from the huge domed cavern, led vast tubes bored through the rock, to every great city of Mu. This was the famous "Intramend" — meaning end of every train track, a word with the same meaning as our own "all roads lead to Rome."

As Maiya glided from the car, she stopped in astonishment, for the scene was now so vastly different from the place she remembered.

Every track had been cleared, and as far as her eye could see stretched row on row of great spaceship hulls, in all stages of completion. The Intramend had been turned into a vast factory, and her people were building there a mighty fleet of their own. This was astounding because always before the Serpent People had left the larger part of ordinary mechanical labor to the great Atlan centers in the north hemisphere. They had been content to pursue their own bent, to remain the theoretical, technical and scholastic giants of Mu, who considered themselves a little above plain hard work with the hands. Mentally, the older citizens of the Serpent People looked up only to the Titans, of vaster age and greater life-experience, for the Titans were not so truly sprung from Mu itself, but from a space-spanning race seldom to be found settled upon any world.

Never had Maiya seen her people so intent upon manual labor, never had she seen such bustle and work-a-day activity among them. The scene brought home to her the terrific changes come over her world as no other could. It was evident they had cut loose from the Atlan federation, and were now doing all manufacturing work themselves, not relying upon the northern states for any help.

Maiya glided to a telescreen set in a pedestal of stone, stone a part of the floor itself since the world was made, and swifty dialed the number of her cavern home. Some of her family should be there, to send for her.

The screen revealed her home. The silent, empty interior depressed her. The auto-answer of the mech assured her that all of the seed of Raful were now away at their duties, and indicated a readiness to record any message until their return. Maiya released the lever with a little sigh of displeasure. It was not a cheerful homecoming for her.

Sadly she made her way to a waiting car, deciding to go to her empty home and to sleep. Many things come right, magically, during sleep. Tomorrow they would all be present, welcoming her.

With a sigh of anticipation of the usual pleasant dreams — distributed to all by a kind of educational board who were in truth more like guardian angels in function—Maiya, just before drifting

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into sleep, awaited the contact with the dream-makers. This was an integral part of all Elder culture.

But tonight she did not dream as expected! She fell, instead, into a deep troubled sleep. She seemed to be drained by some ugly energy, knew she was giving of herself, of her life force, to something . . . It was not a dream!

She was unconscious in sleep, but something of her mind remained aware, the part that had expected a welcome dream from her old familiar ray-friends of the dream-makers. Instead, she was contacting something unpleasant with her mind, something unusual and wholly undesirable. This thing was busily engaged in filling her mind with frustrational concepts of futile activity. She was on a treadmill that hastened toward some evil destiny, and could not get off. And all the time it drained her stupefyingly—and asked questions.

She was a person experienced in a lifetime of dream-sleep, well accustomed to the semi-awareness of the dream state. She sensed the dream rays of her friends sweep past, unknowing that she was home. After they had passed, the oppressive hiding something came back, to torment her sleep with its unfamiliar and ugly prying. Then, it tempted her:

"Was not her seed the finest in all Serpena's many ancient lines of blood? Who was she to deny the future its right to be born? She must mate" — and abruptly the thing provided for her a dream image of a mate, but one she could never consider except with complete disgust. In spite of her will the powerful rays filled her with a nasty kind of lust for it.

Abruptly something seemed to frighten the thing away; it disappeared, and the familiar fantastically pleasant pictures of a dream ray swept over her and passed on, un-noticing her presence or the ray that was upon her.

At once the ugly dream began again, an ugliness sourcing she knew not where, but she sensed in the mind behind it many things. There had been days of very hard work for the thing, and nights of incessant indulgence where every ugly lust had been gratified. Now it had behind it days of doing nothing but watching. What was it watching? She sensed it had been watching some member of this household, and she knew then it was a spy ray, for her family were all apt to be engaged in important defense work for the safety of her people. It had been taking notes of the sleeping minds in this house for a long time. Taking thought records from the sleeping minds of the details of the routing of supplies through the tubes to the huge Intramend which was now the focus of all activity. Taking record notes constantly, and hence had observed her entrance at once, seized its chance to search her mind.

Suspicion grew into a struggling little alarm bell in her mind, trying to awake her, but the thing would not let her go. With a half-sigh she relaxed her mind, and

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bent her will instead to hear more clearly what the tormenting mind was really thinking, back of its half contemptuous sex play with her sleeping self. Seeking out, as only an experienced dreamer can, that mind's secrets, seeing there the plan of attack which its forces were about to launch upon Serpena. That plan caused her to awake with a great cry of despair and sorrow for her people.

Even as she cried out the black ray of forgetfulness struck her mind, wiping out every image from her inward picture screens, extracting with its hungry blackness every vagrant thought energy from all the thinking places of her active mind. Then it was gone, fled from her too-great awareness, leaving her sitting there trying vainly to remember what it was that had awakened her that had seemed so important. She could not remember anything except that she *must* remember!

Maiya flowed angrily from the great round serpent sleeping couch, began to undulate in a waving stream of glittering strength about the circular chamber, round and round. What was it she wanted to remember that the thing had erased as it fled?

At last, bit by vague bit, her mind re-erected the almost vanished images of that dream. New energies poured across her mind from now awakened cells, touching the still present imprints with new-birthed activity. Something about imminent attack, something about terrible doom for all her people!

That *had* been a spy ray, and its departing attempt to erase its visit from her mind had been a bit too hurried. She had pumped the fact of imminent attack from the thing!

It had been an ugly dream, full of peculiarly atrocious sensual images and unnatural impulses toward sex acts never dreamed before by her, sleeping or awake. The character of the creature proved the presence of an evil spy, here where never before had such a thing been recorded.

A creature with a wholly vicious attitude toward the sacred fields of night thoughts, the most private and sacredly guarded possession of the individual, open only to authorized members of the dream-makers, sworn to teach good and to use no opportunity to extort wealth or to inflict punishments, sworn to a strict observance of complete neutrality and beneficence in their nightly visits into the minds of the citizens. The dream-makers, almost an ascetic cult who had little other contact with the mass of life than through their dream-rays, could never have been responsible!

Some depraved thing had such mechanisms in use over the greatest city of Serpena! Some enemy thing could invade and mock her own inner self in sleep!

* * *

Maiya knew that the unwanted and unnatural dream experiences and reactions and memories would continually crop up in her after life as guilt complexes, as a barrier between herself and any intimate friend who glanced into her mind.

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She knew there would be a taint of conscious sin, of evil will in herself, now, after what had been done. To so people her mind with things such as she by conscious choice would never have allowed to occur to her, was to violate her quite as much as if the thing had scarred her face with acids!

To a mind trained in the use of the telaug, doing the most intimate acts and psychologically manipulating mental states and convictions during sleep is a method of medicine vastly more effective than psycho-analysis. These methods of treatment during sleep were more sacred than any other thing to the members of those races of the past. They were a normal part of their schooling, and it would no more have occurred to one of the Titans to use such private material and delicate power for selfish ends than it would have occurred to Ben Franklin to kick his little granddaughter in the face.

It was hard for one raised in the strict convention of the sacredness of sleeping thought to realize that any human creature could exist which did not recognize the sacredness of possession of self, the individual's right to privacy and immunity from spiteful tampering with the very base of her sanity, or her character.

Maiya knew that the subtle evil done to her would affect her all her life; that much of the very birthplace of beauty and poetry in her mind had been destroyed by the sullying of the fair fields of thought with the hateful phantasmagoria of completely repellent experiences and sex reactions; the clumsy pawing over of her innermost heartstrings; the ugly stimming playing on those strings with an unknown creature's blunt moist fingers of evil lust!

* * *

In Tean City Maiya had come to understand there was evil seeping into the minds of the Atlans from some secret and terribly powerful source that could not even be thought of as existent without danger of death.

But here, in her own beloved home city, to find a similar horror crawling through the sweet and sacred dream fields of the sleeping citadel of the soul of her race!

A terrific anger grew to white heat in Maiya's breast. She sprang to her own ray mech and swung a search beam in invisible diffuseness far over the city, searching for the scent of the evil mind that had thus trampled her most private garden of inner life.

Far, too far for her effectively to focus and read, she noted the sullen force field of ugly magnetic, sensed it wink suddenly out, knew that sudden absence signified hiding, deduced the presence of a powerful alien mech some distance to the north of her position.

Hurriedly Maiya swung her ray, spoke to the night-watch, and the great search beams all swung to the indicated position, caught a distant movement, a speeding flyer heading for the vacant caverns long abandoned for the newer and better equipped southern borings.

Whatever creature it was, Maiya was of two minds about it. Noth-

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ing so beastly could possibly be intelligent enough to represent a genuine threat to Serpena, one part of her mind reasoned. Another more correctly functioning segment of her mind assured her that evil of any kind is necessarily beastly, and can seem apparently stupid, but that *all* harm inevitably springs from such living creatures. Hence if there was in truth danger of attack, this thing in its escape would lead directly to it.

* * *

In our modern world there are two kinds of people, the eye-minded, and the ear-minded.

The former *see* the world with simple surface vision, and record in their memory that surface impression.

The latter pay more attention to what they *hear,* and remember best words they have read to them, or that they overhear. Musicians are more apt to remember a song than the slim beauty of the singer.

In the ancient world there was a third type of mind, and this type predominant among them. They were the kind who are telepathic-minded, they *sensed* things with the telaug, or without the use of artificial aids, and they remembered best what is sensed that way. Life, when one senses so deeply and completely with the mind itself in the use of the telaug, is a vaster and more vivid thing than it can ever be for the two modern types of minds—the eye and the ear minds.

These people are more alive than any one can be with only eyes and ears. It is not a woman's outer curves or color of hair or skin they fall in love with. It is not through the eye's vision that woman strikes into the heart of man with the ancient all-conquering arrow. No, they fall in love with a mental impression of her complete *being,* her character, her inner nature.

This vast difference between modern life and the ancient world is very hard to convey to one who has never experienced augmented telepathic message contact. It is a contact infinitely more sensual and revealing and satisfying than lip to lip and thigh to thigh as we moderns meet in love.

That sort of love is deeper, more complete, more completely real to all the senses than is eye or ear love, which, when the deeper characteristics are at last laid bare to us, proves often to have been but a snare, a delusion of nature's most vulgar devising.

It was this deep love of mind to mind that Maiya had borne for Vorn, the Titan youth slain by the hidden evil in Tean City.

They had mingled an infinitely sensual perfume of ecstatic, stimulated thought of vast intensity, and complete revelation each of the other. Maiya knew the great inner self of the lad and could not lose her memory of it. There remained with her a terrible and deep sorrow, a vast hurt and deprivation of mind. Such loss is much greater than is sorrow today for we usually know little of what lies beneath the surface of a mate's smile.

In the ancient world, they knew truly the constancy and complete

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candor of uninhibited passion wholly revealed each to the other over the telaug and stim. Each tiny inner impulse can become a great poem of meaning under the influence of life rays, meaning never confused or ambiguous.

In the world of complete and constant mental contact each with the other, a people so welded together by complete knowledge and confidence engendered by that knowledge, this wholly beautiful and unrepressed mental intercourse forever growing into greater and more binding ties between the race units, is the real story of the people of the ancient world.

To bring that story to you, hampered by your inexperience with the actual nature of mental contact over telaug beams, requires your best effort to understand the sort of life we would lead if everyone would always know each little hidden thought in every mind merely by swinging their beam and looking. And every living chamber was equipped with one or more telaug devices of an infinite variety of modifications of function—in vastly greater profusion than our telephones.

To understand *your own* heritage of the instincts of right and reason and justice and virtue and normal goodness, *you must correctly imagine that world,* for it was the source and growth place of those instincts which we have still with us.

Some things lead us to suspect these valuable and ancient instincts may be dying out. It might help if we understood how they came into being in the first place. They are *not* the products of the law of the jungle or the survival of the fittest as some would have us taught.

Our own sensuality is a pale and puny violet, bleached and anemic, beside the passion flower of vital red hues that was their pleasure in each other. When they truly loved, there could be no doubts or double dealings. The nature of their contacts precluded the possibility of our own tawdry shams and pretenses of unreal passions.

Our saying "beauty is as beauty does" is the simple truth of beauty in a world where minds meet on a plane where eye vision is but the frosting on a cake of infinite richness. No outward appearance however lovely could gloss over an inward ugliness or poverty of soul, a hateful will, or a jealous disposition. The outward appearance would not even be noticed for the instant shunning of the inward hideousness of soul.

* * *

Those leading the revolt against the long-dominant groups of ruling families of the Atlan Federation were a secret clique of notorious renegades. They were hidden in the abandoned caverns of that already old network of borings, those constructed by the first space rovers to touch Mu when it was first burgeoning into gigantic plant growth under the sudden heat of a young just-born sun.

Their leader was a creature named Zeit, once an Elder of early Atlan politics. He had been exiled to space for a flagrant cruelty, but

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had his abberations been more clearly understood, he would have met a more just fate.

The people of Tean City, of all Atlan bloods, he now hated for having judged him. He had returned to Mu secretly, burning with a long range plan for complete revenge upon those who had bested him in his grab for power. He had holed up in the abandoned tubes unobserved. Gradually gathering about him all the outcasts who had fled through the centuries to the empty caverns, he had organized a powerful secret society—and in the end seized control of the innermost governing chambers of the Federation rodite.

When Zeit's activities placed his lieutenants in the heart of the rodite system of government — a government functioning by powerful control fields which could be broadcast to whole cities of people, so that they must obey the strong penetrative synthetic neural currents — he was able to keep the channels of communication blocked so that no whisper escaped to any powerful group apt to oppose his plans.

Thus every one between himself and complete power over the Atlan peoples was murdered, and their deaths kept a secret.

It was this period of interior crisis which saw Mutan Mion rise to fame by managing to escape and to bring to Mu the fleets of the Nor races.

It was the ships of the Federation, those built for the planned migration from Mu, which Zeit seized and sent against Serpena, with a scheme of annihilation which he hoped would eliminate their strength from the struggle in the open which he knew must sooner or later come to pass.

He did not know that out in space the Nor fleets were gathering for a descent upon Mu, and he thought that only the Serpent people of the southern caverns stood between him and complete domination of the whole planet.

He had achieved complete isolation from all the rays that guarded Atlan cities by confining their activities to exclude any possible search of the abandoned tubes, which left him channels of movement covering nearly the whole of Earth.

* * *

To contact the mind of a creature who had grown to adulthood from a childhood spent about the hidden evil nests of Elder Zeit's followers was so shocking to Maiya as to be unbelievable. She could not reason how such a creature could have grown and attained strength to injure — unmeasured, unjudged, and unknown!

Indeed there was no known place on or in the planet where the thing could have grown except the hideaways of Zeit's forces about which she had never heard. She thought at first the thing must be from space, an alien from an evil star. Yet, quite distinct in its mind, was the consciousness of being a resident of Mu! These she knew must be the murderers. This creature was one of those who had killed Vorn, and every energy in her body became a raging intent

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to revenge that murder of her beloved, to rid Earth of all its kin.

Maiya glided from her still empty home, cascaded her glittering curves in swift waves down the ramps to the rolling ways where waited a car that would take her to the hangars of flying craft.

Governed wholly by unreasoning anger, she flowed into the round padded cockpit of the jet flyer, a weightless shell, with antigrav units giving it a dead weight of less than an ounce. She shot the throttle forward, and the tiny needle jets lifted the feather-light plane in a sharp curve out into the center of the great boring leading toward the place where she had seen the vehicle of the evil thing disappear.

Maiya unconsciously planned to kill the thing with her bare hands. It had polluted her mind with its night snooping; it had vandalized the lovely gardens of her mind, so long and carefully cultivated, with ill-intended manipulations which destroyed the basic impulses toward beauty, the ever-growing dreams which were the reverse side of reality where the roots of future occurrence were already alive as little seeds of thought. She had been mutilated in the very birthplace of the future pattern of her life.

Her plane flashed along far ahead of the pursuit sent out by the military, The Clan Alon, the Serpent warriors. They saw the rash flyer dash after the fleeing spy, and sent their own planes less unwisely along the same path while huge search beams from the stationary ray sent tel-pentra, the luminous visionray, through all the rock ahead. Their own small telaug beams flickered here and there to pick out any alien activity.

They all knew no one would venture out into their power on such a mission unless sent by a greater force in hiding beyond. They had no wish to fall into a trap, and they did not know their own loved Maiya had burst the bonds of sanity and was in the grip of overpowering rage. They could not even try to keep up with the rash lone plane hard on the trail ahead, hard after the shadow-pale distant image of the spy.

Maiya emerged from her trance of unreasoning anger to find her plane slowing against some invisible barrier. The barrier grew stronger, seized hold, began to draw her on as she reversed jets to pull free.

Irresistibly she was drawn mile after mile, to stop at last before the massed ranks of a battle fleet of spacers nested there in the unused caverns of the earthquake zone.

When the first brutally strong augmentation struck her mind, Maiya realized to the full the completely hideous nature of the enemy. The lack of humanity and normal goodness of heart were a revelation still too new to be expected. She felt a degradation and a nakedness never before sensed by her anywhere. Her sensitive, exotic inner self lay bare before those officers of the waiting fleet, and the vandals idly picked her soul to pieces with shafts of vastly

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augmented criticism, of evil suggestion, of idle, too-powerful stimulation of the glands that cause eroticism. In minutes she lay exhausted, sobbing, outwardly unhurt, but mentally stripped and outraged and violated in every deep holy sanctum of her being. Rage struggled to rise and throw off the evil stimming touch of alien mind to hers, but no mind can fight the energies of the dynamos behind the telaug beam. Spent with resistance she lay quivering, waiting for the deeper outrage to come.

* * *

The speeding flyers behind Maiya's little craft saw her capture, knew that it meant a source of power that could only exist on a battle spacer of hugest size, which meant too great strength for them to attempt attack. They brought the jet planes to a halt, swung in tight circles, sped back the way they had come with the news of invasion.

But the men who had kept their presence and intentions secret from the people of a whole planet for centuries did not mean to have their lives risked now in open combat. They could not reach the distant flyers, indeed only vaguely detected their presence on the trail from Serpena, but they knew that the time for the execution of their plans was *now*.

They had been hard at work in preparation of their attack for many weeks. They meant to destroy all life in the southern borings at one stroke.

Across each tunnel leading to the Intramend they had melted down the rocks into a great plug of immense strength. Against this still cooling plug they had stacked hundreds of cubic yards of their strongest explosive. It was not an atomic explosive, but one nearly as powerful though slower of action. Thus each great highway of rock became the barrel of a gun, and they were at the trigger awaiting the placing of the bullet. The "bullets" were being gingerly placed to be fired down each great barrel toward Serpena, and the creatures handling them were dying from the mere presence of the deadly stuff. These were a kind of "slowed down" atomic bomb, capable of giving off tremendous quantities of radioactive gases, and of a weight carefully calculated so that the whole sum of bombs would make the southern network untenable. For years, if no serpent man lived to start the atmosphere regulators pumping, or the radioactive particle extractors to functioning in the air ducts. These were a recent installment, placed to clean the air drawn from the surface of the sun poisons which the Serpent technicians recognized as causing both age and evil.

The paramount purpose of the plan was to render the ships waiting in the Intramend useless for their purpose, to ground the fighting forces of the Serpent people indefinitely, if any survived the initial attack.

Maiya now lay coiled within a locked chamber in one of those long dark shapes of dread power. Her prison was within the ship of

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Admiral Dartin, who had been Elder Zeit's right hand in every maneuver that required tactical knowledge of space warfare.

Maiya, alone of all her people, had any inkling of the doom about to be visited upon them. She, in her mental contacts with Dartin and many others since her capture, had inevitably glimpsed the plans in their mocking minds. Now and again her great serpent body uncoiled, sent her round the metal walls of the ship's brig, seeking, seeking for some way to get word to her people before the first immense charge of explosive announced the end of Serpena.

In her mind, the picture of Serpena's toiling, faithful millions suddenly blasted with billowing radioactive gases, forced through all the network of living caverns by the pressure of the exploding bombs, racked her with horror.

Behind the barriers, the long ships, once proud members of the official fleet of Atlan, now actually agents of Atlan's destruction, waited. The eyes of the renegade crew of dero minds watched, intent each one upon the scene on the other side of the barrier of still-hot melted rock; waited with clenched jaws the terrific detonation of the tons of Nitol lying in ranks, great black blocks of the strongest explosive known to the Atlan science. Intently they watched the engineers gingerly placing the great shells full of Doonin, which was their equivalent of our U235, though designedly a slower explosive than our atomic bomb. The shells, vaned and pointed, were coated over with a babbitt-like metal for their accidental contact with the smooth rock walls of the tunnel, which they did not quite fill with their bulk. The Nitol was placed so as to explode in consecutive timing so as to generate a gradually building up gas pressure which would set the shells of Doonin on their way without the shock discharging the balanced forces chained inside. In their nose was a proximity fuse set to discharge upon nearing any large metallic object. Those noses of the bombs all lay pointed toward the death of the Serpent people. They watched the hand of the Admiral moving in decision upon the firing lever of the heat ray which would fire the first tunnel-gun.

* * *

Inside the largest of the waiting, expectant ships, Maiya waited too, sensing from the widespread fields of the telaug communicators now activated, the many minds' greedy anticipation of the coming holocaust. Sensed and heard and saw more clearly and vividly than ever human does with eye or ear the final terrible preparations of the death of all her people. Knew it all, knew there was no hope of the attack being averted now; it had gone too far. Found herself helpless, and raged against that helplessness, sent her glittering, scaled beauty round the prisoning metal walls, fought the door hinges and the heavy lock bolt with her bare hands in desperate raging against her own helplessness. At the last she fell into unconsciousness at

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that first terrible shock of the first titanic explosion beyond the shielding walls of rock before the fleet.

She fell into unconsciousness with all her inner mind knowing, screaming, that that shock was the murder of her people. Her mind went on, even in the dark of sudden sleep, counting the repeated firing of the projectiles in each tube, close and far away and farther — on and on — fifty far-off rail tubes used as gigantic gun barrels to eliminate her people, the Mighty Race of the Serpent of the Southlands, forever from life.

* * *

The first great vaned projectile outsped its own sound waves, rushed down upon the great circular domed valley of the Intramend where labored all the best artisans of Serpena. Rushed nearer, sending before it only the compressing air which could not escape, but increased to vast proportions of density in resisting the passage. That air, transmitting along its singular body the increasing pressure, began to blow from the tube mouth into the Intramend. A gentle breeze, swiftly increased to a torrent of howling wind, a siren blowing some terrible alarm—and the great bomb rushed nearer on its flight across half a continent.

Those gathered laboring minds, all the best of the ancient race, intent there on the problem of the swift creation of many ships to bear many people, heard the suddenly rising howl of wind from the tunnel mouth. Deduced together, in contact as they were, the meaning of the sudden howling wind from the tube. Estimated from the rate of change in the pitch the probable speed of the projectile and the distance from them. Guessed from their knowledge of such things that all life in the southern caves would cease to exist within short seconds. Many of those engineers knew just what fraction of time's unit was left to them to the tenth decimal, but only one also knew what must be done in the fraction of a second remaining.

From no other race of beings could any reaction have arisen in time to avert the holocaust.

But from an engineer at work testing the controls of one ship the exact answer to the suddenly proposed problems arose instantaneously. The motors of the ship roared, he lifted the great hulk, swung its nose a fraction of arc, gave it full throttle directly into the roaring maelstrom of air forcing its way from before the onrushing weight. Left the throttle full on, blazed up that rocky trail to his death with glory in his heart, thankful that he had been able to place this ship before the approaching doom in time.

It was several seconds before the next projectile began to roar its approach with pressured air from the next adjacent tube, seconds of time in which every mind present had analyzed the sound and the sudden suicide of the engineer at the controls of the departed ship. Even before all had glimpsed the stark necessity of a suicide for each missile being fired against them,

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another ship lifted and shot into the roaring tube. Those serpentine half-human bodies contained heroes' hearts.

Into the other ships rushed the pilots, struggling to be the first to lift one of those half-finished hulks and fling it successfully against the deadly onrushing object whose nature they guessed correctly without needing confirmation.

That confirmation came now from the first tube mouth in a terrific blasting concussion as the first hero met the bomb with his ship's bulk, and ship and bomb burst together into one flare of terrible sound and heat—and the gases of that explosion began to bellow forth upon the Intramend.

From that point the strange battle, occupying only the short paced seconds of desperation, became a pageant of heroism unexampled in any history. Each ship able to fly took its place at one or another of the fifty tubes leading northward. Each of them contained two men, one pilot and one co-pilot to bolster decision if fear conquered. Into the tubes they roared at full throttle, not waiting longer, to meet the onrush of certain death before it could come upon the whole working force in the Intramend. The remaining engineers wheeled out powerful blowers from the stores, placed them before the tube mouths and began to build up a back pressure of air to hold back the deadly gases as much as possible. This itself became soon a deadly game of death, trying to get the blowers placed and bolted before the tube mouths before the deadly gases now pouring forth in increasing quantities struck him down in death. Each knew their activity meant sure death, but none fled. Instead, from the southern end of the great space of the Intramend began to pour stretcher bearers, wheeled enclosed cars of the nursing corps, dashing up, picking up the bodies of those struck down, and wheeling away out of the deadly burning gas.

Some tube mouths almost became blocked as two or more ships trying to enter at the same instant nosed into each other, but their mental contacts made instantaneous decisions possible. One always jetted back in time to allow the first to pass. Thus it was that disaster was almost brought upon them because of their heroism rather than because of their cowardice.

It was a scene of suicidal heroism. No one who saw it would ever forget. Those mighty near immortal creatures so loved their fellows they were anxious to be the first to give up a life infinitely more valuable and lengthy than is the case today.

* * *

Maiya, weeping alone in her cell aboard the admiral's ship, could not know how heroically the men of Serpena had met the threat, how successfully they had blocked the gun barrels pointed at the heart of their ancient race.

* * *

Now from those rock tubes the crash of ship and bomb, the awful detonations confined in the tubes blasted forth into the great dome,

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reverberated, were reinforced by the next and the next. Fifty titanic explosions pounded each their terrible hammer blow to build up a vibration earth-quaking; rock shivering. The great dome of the Intramend quivered and cracked across and fragments fell in a rain upon the toiling people. As this stupendous concussion reached its climax of crushing sound, the people still alive in the great domed chamber fell unconscious, blood streaming from their eyes and mouth and ears. Succeeding and increasing waves of force burst blood vessels in brain and lungs and flesh . . .

Serpena had been saved, but at a cost too great for estimation, at a sorrow the annals of that race would never cease relating.

Saved, by one pilot's quick senses and unerring deductive powers, by his ability to translate instantaneous thought into almost instantaneous action.

In the dead center of the circular plane of the floor some dozen of all the horde of toiling engineers, workmen of all grades, metal-workers, draftsmen, welders, riggers still stood. This was the dead area where the succeeding waves had neutralized each other and left an area of safety. These stood silent, their coils quiescent, their eyes filled with tears, as the full realization of the disaster was borne home; now there was no need for instant action. Silent, awestruck by the magnitude of the heroic suicidal exhibition of supreme courage. It had all been too swift for any observer's mind fully to comprehend and analyze. Now, feeling the loss of their fifty ships, perhaps more than the loss of their hundred-odd sons and brothers aboard their ships, they stood berating themselves for placing mere metal above the value of human lives. Yet, for so long had they toiled abuilding the sleek, powerful vessels, they could not adjust to proper evaluation.

If Maiya had seen that sight, how she would have been proud to be of that singular race, instead of half doubtful of her own reptilian lower half as somehow an unworthy part of her existence.

These dozen busied themselves reviving the fallen, assisting the now inpouring rescue crews, or stood pondering the creeping clouds of gases seeping past the stop-gap blowers which roared with power as they tried unsucessfully to hold back the terrible pressure of confined explosion in the far tubes' shattered length. Then they gave orders to begin the construction and placing of permanent bulkheads to create a complete air seal against the radioactivity that was even now burning about their faces.

Half alive themselves, they watched the glowing gases begin to pour from the circle of openings. Some of them knew that this gas was the real weapon sent against them, and that it was still coming in in ever greater quantities. This weapon was not yet rendered ineffective, and only more suicidal effort could stem the flow of insidious, sure death.

Their whole people was still in danger if they did not succeed in

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plugging forever that series of openings.

Orders were given to evacuate the Intramend; and even as the wounded were being carried out, these heroic workers began their own death work, throwing together the metal sheets in rapidly welded bulkheads, racing the big lifting cranes to place them over the openings, and dropping dead at their labor as the burning gases ate through their lungs.

Help now came from the upper levels where the workers of the other shift had been sleeping, more blowers and more were wheeled into place to try to stem the gas—but such gases have a way of spreading into adjacent air with great rapidity. The Intramend, even as they worked at the fifty tube mouths, was being completely sealed off from all the tubes of the southland. And as the call went out to them to leave their efforts and come out, there was none left of that first horde of serpent men to answer, for each had died trying to do his duty to his race.

Each of those dead had foreseen his own death in that required answer to the need and had met the need without hesitation. Those only had survived who had been struck unconscious by the concussion and were borne away to the hospitals.

* * *

Zeit's Admiral, Dartin, as soon as the last of the improvised gigantic cannons had been detonated, led his fleet upward to the surface, out into space beyond reach of raywatch, then southward in a great circle, coming down beyond the lower limits of Serpena to enter the tubes again in the area now known as the Horn. It was then a frigid place, unpeopled either above or below the surface, but there was an entry placed there for the convenience of trade with those space people who require a frigid temperature to be comfortable.

Dartin's fleet sped northward again, deploying in an ever wider front as more and more tubes branched off northward. His intent was to come upon whatever remnants of Serpena's military still remained alive, and complete their destruction down to the last individual. Ships deploying right and left through each divergent tunnel, Dartin sped northward, confident, and his path was one that any child's mental equipment could have deduced would be his next move.

If he could have seen the magnificent instantaneous reactions of these serpent enemies of his, he would not have rushed northward so confidently.

Southward, through those same tiered and branched corridors, was flaming an answer to his threat. With space detectors activated in the nose assembly, the warplanes of Serpena searched out the far scent of motion, of heat, of vibration of engines. Searched, found his location, and stopped to launch toward him a special weapon of their own, reserved for centuries against need; a weapon that Dartin had never even heard existed, it having been secretly invented before his own birth.

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It was a common torpedo with a proximity fuse, but prisoned in it was a substance with a special affinity for the Atlan fuel, which was a combination of liquid hydrogen and certain toluene derivatives. It was these derivatives which the weapon acted upon, combining to form a gas more poisonous than cyanogen.

Atlan ships, when operating in atmosphere, took in atmospheric oxygen to conserve the liquid oxygen in their tanks, and this was the opening toward which the weapon was directed. Since the weapon had never been used, Dartin had taken no precautions against it. The gas was not supposed to affect the ship in whose fuel chambers it was generated, but the next ship behind in the tunnel passages along which they traveled. Most ships in atmosphere conserved their supplies of air by using atmospheric air, and the Serpent warriors aimed a flight of these torpedoes toward the Atlan renegades, hoping against hope they were not prepared for its somewhat obsolete nature.

The torpedoes burst about the leading ship in a fury of sound, and the great ship of Dartin rocked and vibrated but passed on seemingly unhurt. Dartin laughed at the futile nature of the attack and pressed on, more confident than before. But his own jets were now spewing forth a deadly gas into the path of his own fleet, following through the tunnel. The gas billowed behind him, invisible, and the air ports of the following ships sucked it up. One by one his fleet fell, veered from straight flight to crash into the tunnel walls.

It was a specialized weapon, designed for use only in the particular conditions under which Dartin was operating. It would have been useless in space or in open air, but in the tunnels, where Dartin sped toward the now fleeing Serpent war-fleet, it was deadly.

That gas wiped the life from a half-dozen ships before the rest brought up and gave reverse jets full throttle to blow the gas from before their path, to drive themselves backward out of its proximity.

Dartin, signaled by telaug that his fleet had run into disaster, stopped his own ship, jetted backward to rejoin the ships now far behind. Passing through the tunnel now filled with deadly gas, his stupidity cost himself and his crew their lives.

The next in command, a captain, Carnir, realized that against the powerful Serpent armament the caverns were no place to fight space ships anyway. He led the flight from the southern caverns into open space, leaving behind some seven ships of the line, once the Atlan federation's best ships.

* * *

Aboard one of these empty hulks, rolling in idle drifting upon the clouds of gas, was one being still alive. It was Maiya, listening with her mind for the cause of the silence and the cessation of activity.

Sealed within her prison, Maiya scented the gas stealing through her ventilators, knew that death

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had struck back at the death-merchants aboard. Her half-frantic involuntary attempts to escape ceased. The calmness and piercing correctness of her mind returned. Hardly had she made sure the gas was seeping in than she was at work tearing strips from the hangings, stuffing the ventilator grills, the cracks about the door, searching every corner and crevice for the tiniest path of incoming air that could mean her death.

She had hardly given up this toil as both complete and completely useless when the great ship suddenly bounded forward. The dead pilot had fallen from his seat and the weight had thrown the throttle forward. It crashed against the cavern wall, rebounded, again and again, as the robot pilot took over automatically and fought the rebound until the ship was in level flight down the center of the great boring. As the ship approached a curve in the tunnel, the auto-pilot registered obstacle ahead, nearly cracking Maiya's ribs as the drive power shut off and the fore jets smashed on again.

There Dartin's flagship of the invading fleet hung, empty of all life except Maiya's. Once again she fell into despairing, frantic activity. Her long and glittering body drove her round and round in aimless, final effort.

At last, exhausted and smothering, Maiya tore away the strips she had placed so carefully about the doorways and lay full length with her nose to the thin poisonous draft blowing in from the corridor outside.

Eagerly she breathed in the air, knowing that it must cause her death; but death was better now than this smothering air of her cell . . .

* * *

Far overhead, the Serpent ships arrowed upward to meet the Eagle ships of the Atlan federation.

The Eagle and the Serpent had been friends till this day, allies, members both of the great federation of Atlan peoples. Now they were at each other in fury, the Serpent unknowing what creatures had replaced the former Atlan officers at the controls of those ships.

From a concealed opening north of the one used by the renegades, the Serpent ships shot out and up, forming as they ascended into a tight wedge, the point at the fleeing Atlan ships.

Captain Carnir, his knowledge of the deep-laid plans of Elder Zeit telling him to avoid open conflict which would reveal that they were not genuine Atlan soldiery, was in a quandary.

If he fled there was doubt he could avoid betraying the hiding place of Zeit's forces. If he stood and fought, they were bound to learn the truth. There was doubt in his mind that he could escape the lighter and more maneuverable Serpent ships in a flight into deep space and safety. His none too agile mind could find no way of doing the right thing, and if he headed for sanctuary and the stronger forces of Zeit's main stronghold, he feared Zeit's anger for betraying his whereabouts and his true identity.

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He knew that offense for him was a better solution than flight, for his ships were heavier and better weaponed; but these Serpent devils were renowned in handling their type of ship. He had his doubts of his nondescript crews' gunnery and ability in a long-distance, heavy-weapon battle. And at close quarters, the lighter weapons of the Serpent ships would be as effective as his own.

The fear of Zeit's terrible anger made him head for the moon and the greater speeds possible in the moon's zone of weightlessness. If he could reach the zone first, his jets would give him a vast lead while the Serpent ships were pulling up into the zone. He had seen that displeasure of Zeit's visited upon too many other officers to risk it for himself.

But his decision did not matter. As he circled the moon, his speed now giving him an increasing lead on the pursuit, he saw approaching from behind the moon the vast shapes of alien spacers, an armada, fearful in size, beyond.

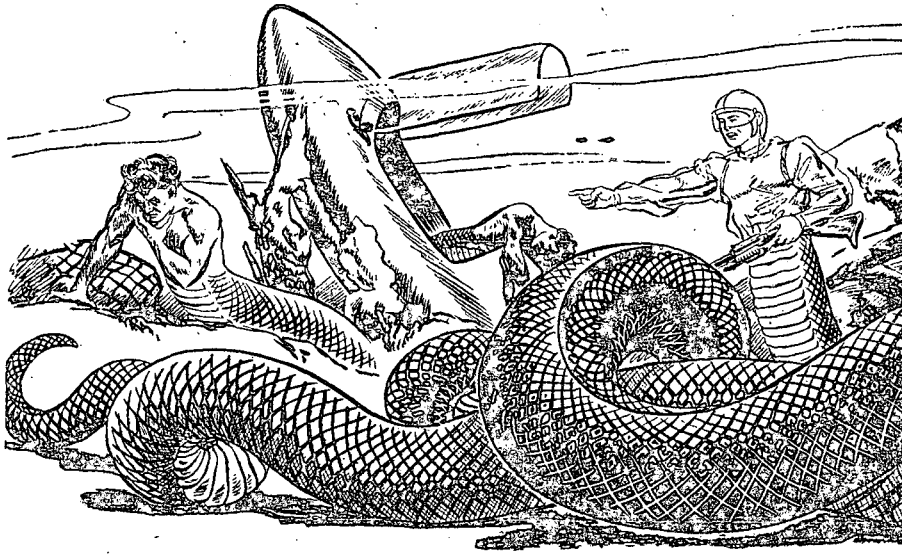
"Nor ships!" he exclaimed in dismay, even as their first bolts blasted his craft out of existence.

* * *

Maiya, expecting to breathe in death from the air now coming through the crevice, was astounded to taste in her nostrils the clean freshness of air just revivified and recharged with integrant ions by the air conditioner.

Outside the ship the most deadly gas known to Serpent science had drifted and eddied in a strong concentration.

All caverns have interconnecting corridors, in which are placed air pumps to circulate cleaned air. In



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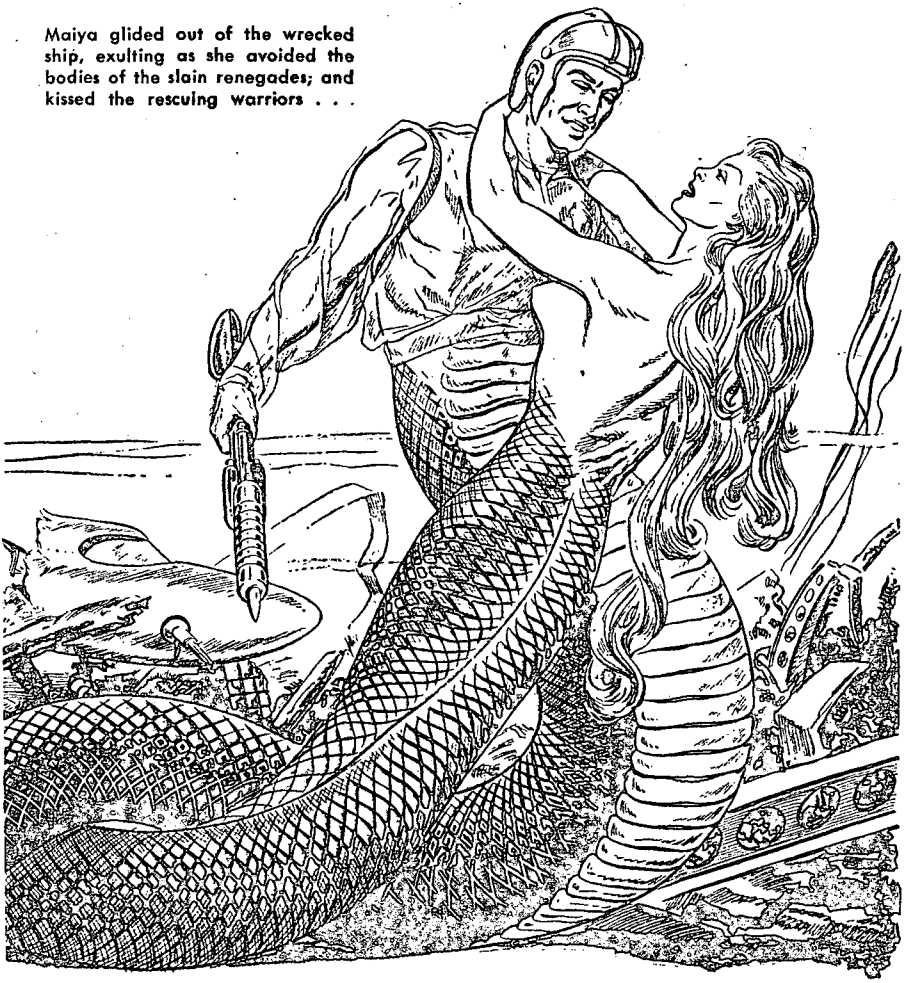
the air pump is a magnetic screening device to extract all unwanted substances. Recently, due to the increasing radioactivity of the air drawn from the surface, a new screening device had been installed, designed to reduce the radioactive content of the air.

It was this latter device which saved Maiya. All the ships of the fleet had helped to carry the great atom bombs, and some of that radioactivity still remained in the hold. The quietly drifting ship lay close to one of these cross corridors, and the emanations from the metal of the hold infected the air about the ship. The little fan that drew



Maiya glided out of the wrecked ship, exulting as she avoided the bodies of the slain renegades; and kissed the rescuing warriors . . .

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air constantly from the tunnels and through the detector device had drawn air from directly about the big craft, and set off the pumps because of the contaminated air. When the big fans went on, a blast of clean air swept about Maiya's prison, soon was circulating everywhere through the craft.

It was a sensation like awaking from a tomb, when Serpent soldiery at last boarded the drifting vessel and opened her prison. They found Maiya, and some knew this was she who had warned the watch of the spy ray and then rashly pursued him, and whose reckless pursuit had definitely betrayed the secret of the oncoming attack.

To Maiya, receiving the gift of life again, and knowing instead of despair the glad feeling of freedom and safety, the faces of her people were the most beautiful of faces. She kissed the warriors as they stood outside her door, glided out and up to the control deck, and felt only a terrific exultation as she avoided the strewn bodies of the renegade horrors Zeit had used in his attempt to overthrow a nation and a race.

* * *

When the Nor ships settled at last upon the surface above Serpena, it was Maiya who was led forth to receive the accolade as she who had alerted the watch against the madness from the north. Vanue, Goddess of Nor, deathless Titan of Dark Space, spoke to her, placing one great hand upon her silver hair.

"It is the blood of such as you we wish most to salvage from this doomed planet. The Serpent race has lost many heroic lives in this struggle, short in time, long in destruction for you and yours. I have chosen several heroic survivors of the battle in the Intramend, and yourself, to accompany us to Nor for training in our schools. Then, in time, you will return to your people with vastly more to give them than you now can."

Maiya bowed her head, knowing the honor was greater than she deserved.

"We of Serpena find our best home among our own similar shapes, dear Lady. But I will go with you and serve you, since your judgment is better than my own in this."

"There is so much that you must learn quickly. You will not be alone; your finest are to train as a unit in the technology of life in the cold worlds where no sun exists. Suppose you try our ways before you are so sure you would not be at home among us?"

* * *

So it was that Maiya, the serpent woman, became one among many who studied in the laboratories of Vanue of Nor, and met there, later on, Mutan Mion and Arl, and others she had known in the medical schools of Tean City.

It was given to her credit that the race of Serpent People survived. However true that might be, there were few survivors to whom to give the credit, and Maiya became one of those ever after pictured among the heroic figures of Serpena's numerous art works.

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Mr. Shaver's Lemurian Alphabet

A—Animal (used AN for short)
B—Be (to exist—often command)
C—See
D—(also used DE) Disintegrant energy; Detrimental (most important symbol in language)
E—Energy (an all concept, including motion)
F—Fecund (use FE as in female—fecund man)
G—Generate (used GEN)
H—Human (some doubt on this one)
I—Self; Ego (same as our I)
J—(see G) (same as generate)
K—Kinetic (force of motion)
L—Life
M—Man
N—Child; Spore; Seed (as ninny)
O—Orifice (a source concept)
P—Power
Q—Quest (as question)
R—(used as AR) Horror (symbol of dangerous quantity of dis force in the object)
S—(SIS) (an important symbol of the sun)
T—(used as TE) (the most important symbol; origin of the cross symbol) Integration; Force of growth (the intake of T is cause of gravity; the force is T; tic meant science of growth; remains as credit word)
U—You
V—Vital (used as VI) (the stuff Messmer calls animal magnetism; sex appeal)
W—Will
X—Conflict (crossed force lines)
Y—Why
Z—Zero (a quantity of energy of T neutralized by an equal quantity of D)

Some "English" Lemurian Words

ABSENT—Animal be sent (one was sent, therefore is not here)
ADDER—A der (the animal is a der, or deadly)
ARREST—Animal stops to rest (the ar syllable means is dangerously stopped)
BEGET—To cause to exist (command to generate the energy of integrance)
BAD—Be a de (to be a destructive force)
BARD—Bar de (one who allays depressing de force, who overjoys us, decreases depression)
BIG—Be I generate (in the act of generation, as pregnant)
BILK—Be ill kinetic (to run away from ill, to dodge—K for movement)
DARK—Detrimental horrible movement (harrowing things we are apt to see "in the dark")
DECEASE—Stopped by de (disintegrated to the point of ceasing to be—death)
DEVIATE—De vital ate (de has eaten the vital force, implication being the thing goes astray because of destructive force)
DEVIL—De vile (to be vile with de; completely destructive)
DROP—De ro power (disintegrance governs power, thus it becomes less, falls)
LADY—Lay de (allay depression; complimentary term)
MAD—Man a de (one who may de, be apt to destroy)
MEAN—Me animal (animal conscious only of self)
MORBID—More be I de (I don't want to be any more, I want to die)
NEE—Child energy (charm)
NEUTRAL—Ne you te ral (attracted by the charm of both parties)
OBSCENE — Orifice see charm (orifice meant source of life, thus the meaning is evident)
PACT—Power act (an empowered act)
PEAL—Power all (power and all combine to give a loud sound)
PRISON—Price on (to hold for ransom)
QUIT—Quest you I te (get someone else to do good)
VAN—Vital animal (the leader)
ZEAL—Zero all (foolish ardor—to zeal)

THE END

SONS OF THE SERPENT By Wes Amherst
COMING IN THE JANUARY ISSUE

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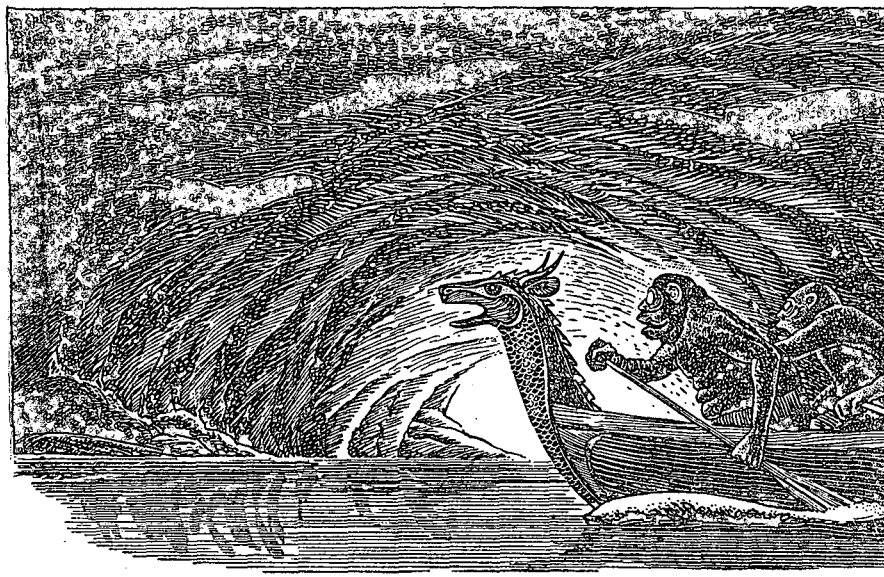

WHERE NO FOOT WALKS

by G. H. IRWIN

VENUS hadn't caught on, back on Earth, the way the first trippers had expected. Many of the prisons that had been established, a la Devil's Island of ancient history, stood abandoned, in this year 2060. They hadn't been able to keep the guards sent out from Earth on the job. Most of them chose to go over to the Carians, when they found out it was that or death.

But the abandoned Earth-built prisons weren't empty. A few of them were still used for prisons, by the Carians. Others were inhabited by the webfooted greenies, who were apt to bunk up anywhere that was dry.

The Carians were a mysterious bunch. No one, except an occasional greenie, ever claimed to have actually seen one. Yet they were the chief reason Earth had abandoned her colonization schemes.

On Venus, that didn't mean the Carians were hobgoblins. It only meant they didn't like publicity.

Few people could honestly say they had actually seen a Sanarian, the legendary Sanar-dren, ruling family of all Venus since time immemorial. And still ruling, secretly, almost surreptitiously, in spite of the Carian's deadly enmity.

Secrecy and concealment was an ancient and highly developed art

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Above the boat in the darkness weird black shapes floated . . . Grim fired his needle gun.

Deep in the dank fastnesses of an underground river lay the secret that meant freedom from Carian slavery or death "where no foot walks."

on Venus, as Earthmen had learned to their cost. That cost had been the loss of all face, all power, on Venus. Those Earthmen who remained . . .

* * *

Lee Grim, for a period of time whose extent he himself could no longer reckon, had been a prisoner of the Carians, and he was not so sure they were not hobgoblins, at that. As punishment for escape attempts, he had progressed from mild duress to whipping to steady solitary confinement in the deepest of the endless cells of Fogway Prison, as Earthmen had named it.

Lee Grim was one of the few who could honestly say he had seen the Sanar-dren. He had also heard, but not seen, quite enough of the Carians, as they often passed his cell in the total darkness they preferred.

He had even become acquainted with the Saran princess, Naritza; and she was certainly no hobgoblin. She was as beautiful a chunk of woman as ever wore webs between her fingers. He had been doing an errand for her—one that required his own knowledge of safe-cracking methods on Earth—when the Carians caught him.

Now he listened to the damp drip, like tears, upon the rotting stones. He tried to see along the rows of cells, but the darkness

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never lifted. Carians didn't need lights. The heavy silence lay along the passages like the unseen weight of some unwanted living monstrous thing.

In those passages *no foot walked!* That is, no foot that *should* walk anywhere. The Carians went by; he could hear the skipping, dragging, frightening sound of them. But he never saw them! And that sound could not be made by feet!

To his eyes, endlessly searching the black, no thing ever showed a face. And thank God for that, he sometimes muttered. Lee was pretty sure he didn't *want* to see Carians.

Lee Grim bent a back that was getting increasingly bony over his daily chore of rubbing one link of his chain against another, with a little rock dust thrown on to give it a bite. After what he felt must be years of time, he was beginning to get results.

The far drip of dampness was a rain of quiet sound, just heard. Lee thought of his own life as a thing to be borne against his will. Lee had a friend, invisible to anyone but himself. He called her Hope, and made a game of seeing her bend above him, encouraging his everlasting rubbing of the two worn links against each other.

Then his lovely friend, Hope, whom he had shaped and imagined into being, took to squatting in the farthest corner and gibbering quietly to herself like a mad woman. Grim ignored her and, with fingers that often bled, worked on at the now rust-pitted chain.

Moving, seeing, warmth, human joy of life—these things had become to Lee like bits of broken glass that swirled before his eyes in a sour wine; a wine he was sure he would never relish drinking again.

Grim had been young-looking, thirty years old the day he had promised the Saran's princess to bring back— His mind clamped down on the thought and banished it. He must be getting weak to allow such things to peril what slim chances he had of freedom. If the Carians should *yarva* that thought out of his head, he would be tortured until the complete data was in their hands. Or until he was very dead. Grim wondered just how old he was now? He wondered if he would ever know?

A day came when the links wore quite through. With trembling hands, Lee twisted the pieces out of each other. A gaunt man rose to his feet, and with him rose a lean wolf of terrible rage, held on a leash as thin and taut as the borderline between sanity and madness. Lee choked the wolf and wrestled with it, and it came to heel. Some day he would turn that thing loose on the Carians, but not this day.

Hobbling, painfully stooping, like an old, old man, Lee made his way up the deserted passages until the white light of day struck at his eyes like sharp pain.

He stood for a long time, out of sight, until at last he could bear that pain. Then he stripped off the rags that his clothes had become, made a loin cloth of them. The

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rest he shoved into a niche in the crumbling wall.

As the Earthman guard came tramping, Lee bent, made a pretense of sweeping with his bare hands at the floor. It was a feeble pretense, but he could not run. If the guard did not notice his white, thin body, or the chain marks on his wrists; if—

Grim switched off his mind, remembering some of these guards had picked up the way of hearing with *yarva* senses, and were addicts of the drug that gave the peculiar sensitivity. That's why they were here, working for the Carians as guards . . . because they couldn't go back to Earth with the drug hunger. There was no *red honey* back on Earth.

He might be taken for one of the workers, if the man did not bother to look too close. There were several freed Earthmen tolerated around the place. Men who had long given up all pretense of being anything but spongers on the peculiar hospitality of the Carian— Lee couldn't think of a proper word. He had still the fear of one of them hearing him. They had a way of being insulted by such thoughts.

The guard passed, never pausing in his stride. Lee straightened, in his hands the fallen chunk of rock he had found along the wall. He took a swift stride, brought it down on the guard's skull.

He stood a long time above the still figure, feeling sick, unable to believe he had succeeded! He would have given odds he hadn't the strength to crush a fly, let alone a man's skull. But that lean wolf of rage had broken the leash, stood mouthing the throat of the dead man yet. Grim choked the wolf again until it crouched and melted from his vision. This was no time to let imagination turn into madness.

Still trembling violently, he stripped off the man's clothes, put them on. Then he hefted the lax heels, wondering if he could really drag him some place where he would not be found at once. The body did move to his tug, he dragged it back and down, panting, his breath painful in his lungs.

Those were hard steps to take, back into the darkness he had hated so long. He rolled the body into an empty cell. They were all empty—or almost all, down here. Except for himself, there had been few others in the dark subterranean cells. The Earth guards had put him there after he had tried escape the first time. This was the second. Grim gave a dry cackle. As if he would ever find strength for a third!

Sometimes the weird steps where-no-foot-walks, didn't come for days at a time. They wouldn't find him for at least twenty-four hours. That black, impossible shadow that bore his food to him had often forgotten him for days. Lee yondered if that blackness was a Carian—or just due to the darkness? One day he would learn that. One day he would kill a Carian, and after that, many more.

The keys at his borrowed belt gave off a sound that is like no other. No sound can be so envied,

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can mean so much to a long termer, as a bunch of keys at a guard's belt.

Now they were at *his* belt, not to be hated or envied, but to be used! It was unbelievably sweet, that jingling sound, and full of a peril that raced like nectar along his wakening nerves.

He swung the weighted billy, loosened the heavy gun in the holster. Then he took it out, pondering. It was a gas pellet gun, Earth made, good only at close quarters against a crowd. And not much good in the open, especially if there was a breeze. He should have some other weapon.

Lee went through his pockets, hoping. That Hope! Hope was a crazy woman, who gibbered in the corner. Why did he ever listen to the mad words she said? Then his hands closed on a little metal object. A Carian explosive needle gun! One of the things that had helped Earthmen decide they wanted none of Venus!

He turned it over, a strange unholy joy in his veins leaping up, running like fire over his face! The magazine in the odd octagonal handle was packed with tiny, shiny needles of terrific explosive force. At least a hundred dead enemies, this thing meant!

Grim pumped up the air cylinder, took off the safety, tucked it in his right-hand pocket. Then, his bony body every bit as ludicrous as he felt it must appear, he swaggered up the tunnel with the oversize uniform flapping about him. Let them notice; he had their death in his hand!

There was nothing ludicrous or pitiful in Lee Grim's mind. He couldn't afford it, someone might *yarva* it. He knew exactly how he looked, but he had to act with his thinking; it was more important than his appearance, here! He almost hoped they would try to stop him. But he shoved the thought down, and thought of the fog. Most Earthmen cussed the fog incessantly.

Across the sun-baked bullpen, where Earth chemicals had made the soil free of plants, he walked now with exaggerated care in the big boots, stepping straight as a robot, lifting his feet too high as if he were half-drunk with one or another of the outlandish greenie's brews. He stood unblinking by the wide gate while the boys overhead pulled the windlass and let him out.

Down the trail to the jungle, his back was one over-sensitized ache of expectation for the shot that did not come. Evidently they hadn't looked too close, this time, or did not give a damn. They were probably stewed; most Earth guards were most of the time. The Carians were supposed to find drunkenness amusing.

There was only one more of the ex-bulls between him and the open jungle; the fellow who took out the lumber gang. He might not even run into him, if he kept his ears working.

Lee's face was a bearded death's head, turning left and right, involuntarily now. His legs were weakening already. He couldn't walk more than a couple of miles, he

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knew. He'd be through before he ever got to the river! It had been close, working on that chain. A few more days of waiting for the meals that came so seldom and he would have been unable to walk. He had to try for the boats.

The motors in these Carian craft were strange to Earthmen. To most greenies, too, except those who wore the Carian brand on their damp shoulders.

Lee stood a long time among the ferns above the slim shapes of the moored boats, listening to the water, watching the flies, wondering which of those fragile shells was the fastest, wondering if he could start that unearthly motor that looked like a coffee grinder with plumbing in a goldfish bowl. His knees buckled, standing there, and he slumped to the wet ground, crawled through the mud to the boats, eeled over the side. He untied the line from the ring laboriously, gave the boat a feeble push, and fell back weakly to stretch out full length in the bottom.

Far off he could hear the chock and thump of axes, the occasional hoarse shout of the guard overseer. He didn't even try to start the motor; they made a penetrating buzz. Not yet. Later, he would try.

The current seemed to take hours before it gripped, and the trees overhead began to move their limbs in a slow dance, backward. Lee turned over and was sick on the boat bottom.

It couldn't last, this luck, it was that madwoman, Hope, playing with him. Someone was sure to see the empty boat, some fool of a prisoner would shout to the guard, to curry a little favor with him. Hell, he had forgotten all the details of the plan. He had meant to turn all the boats loose and drape a few limbs over one, push it along the undercut of the bank and get away while they were retrieving the others. But he hadn't had strength, and he had forgotten. Now, they had boats to chase him, and he knew he'd never figure how to start the motor.

He shook now with a steady, weary trembling. His hand on the little repeater was soaking wet, he took the gun out of his pocket, steadied it against the gunwale. Then it came—and Hope laughed at him.

"There's a boat loose, boss! Drifting by . . ."

"Get back to work. I'll phone in for someone to get it."

The bull voice of him! Lee hated the heartiness of every guard, well-fed while he starved, too lazy to bring him food, too drug-drunk to care. Well, now he had an alternate plan. The guard was walking downstream to the portable walkie-talkie where it hung by the trail. The prisoners were higher up now, the boat was moving along the same pace with the guard. They wouldn't even see what happened. Lee wished they would see and make their try for freedom too. Hell, it didn't matter if they did. A man from Earth had to be abandoned, condemned of his own race, to fall into Carian hands. They had no place to go on Venus if they did escape.

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Lee waited till he heard the bull voice, then raised his head above the boat's side. His first shot took the guard right in his fat waist, and the interior explosion was muffled. He doubled up, fell on his face. Lee fired again at the box on the tree. He hit the trunk, the needle made a crack you could have heard for a mile.

He crawled aft to the motor, fumbled over it, wondering if there was a button to start it. There were several buttons. He pressed three before it began to buzz, and the boat moved away from the dead man. He leaned back, held the tiller idly, and the little boat started to split the water down the middle of the river.

"Now let them come!" growled Lee Grim, free man!

* * *

Naritza, daughter of the ancient people. Naritza, whose direct family line had ruled all Venus once, and still ruled a good part of it—quietly, without ostentation. Naritza would be a queen in another year, when she reached twenty-five. But that was mere formality; she was really queen already, since her father's death, and especially since old Many-eyes died.

Naritza was an extremely well proportioned female, clean-limbed and lovely, her skin only a faint green and quite soft and fine. Her family had in truth little in common with the grosser greenies, the wide-footed, frog-odored folk of the surface lands. They were the last of an ancient, infinitely aloof caste.

She could have passed for an exotic Earth girl, except for the transparent webs between her long, clever fingers. But her alert eyes would have marked her as Venusian. No Earthwoman's eyes had ever contained the depth, the quick sensitivity of yarva-trained perception, the expressive mobility—and few Earth girls had the pride of lineage the ancient breeding on which to base the regal pride of Naritza's warm glance.

She sat in the *farin-drom*,* and in her hands was a very peculiar skin, flexible and soft—nothing over which to shed tears, but Naritza was quietly weeping. Even as she wept, she deftly manipulated the material, coating it with quick-setting fish-scale glue, shaping it, setting it. The stuff took on a weird, unearthly appearance under her careful fingers and appraising eye, wet with tears as they were.

After a time she stood the stiffening thing in the corner, and smiled a sad smile at the hideous mask of age, the wrinkled leathery neck, the apertures of an insect's breathing along the ribs, the insect-like legs, the wide-horned feet. No one would recognize *her* under Many-eyes' hide! And it was his own suggestion! She had loved the old creature, one of the last of a nearly extinct race.

None but herself would know of the masquerade, either, for old Many-eyes had died in her own *farin-drom*, and none but herself had known or would know he was dead.

**Farin-drom*—Venusian for "Queenly harem quarters"; in this case used only by Naritza.

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For nearly a century, Many-eyes had been a servant and counselor of the family of Sanar-dren, of which Naritza was the sole surviving member. There were distant cousins and others, but none of direct line. Their family had always employed some of the aroaksig, and even as the last remnants of the once numerous race of the aroaksig died out, so had the Sanar-dren grown few. But still, the power had remained, somehow. So far as she knew, the aroaksig were extinct, except for this one that had just died in her service.

There would be no more nations of many-eyed, man-like insects on Venus. They had been a clever people, cultured and numerous and dominant over all Venus; *long, long ago.* But their day had passed, and they had gradually become only—the aroaksig, feared for their knowledge of strange sciences and magical works, flattered or tortured to obtain from them the locations of the ancient hiding places of the treasures of the vanished nation. The greenies had carried on the ancient feud which had been the aroaksig's downfall, and accounted for the last groups of them.

Naritza could play the part of the old servant to perfection, for old Baludjik had raised her from a child.

To Naritza, the skin meant freedom from the weary business of playing Queen-to-be in a place where all the decisions were made by the Council of Seated Thinkers, anyway. She laughed, remembering how Lee Grim had called the Seated Ones "honey-ants." She had *yarva*'d the meaning of the strange English phrase from his mind, to break out in unseemly laughter right in the dignified faces of the Council.

"If only Lee-grim were here, so I could befool him with the costume," she murmured aloud, as she always did when she thought of him. For he had always insisted she speak aloud, and not depend on *yarva* for him to hear her thought.

Lee was the only Earthman she knew, and of all the people on Venus, he was the only man she knew who was *like* herself. For the Sanar-dren were a family whose characteristics were so different from the commoner variety of greenie that she felt more at home with Lee-grim than with her own people.

Of course the proper word for greenie was *Arākhopi,* but Lee-grim always refused to use any Venusian word he happened to find uncomfortable on his tongue.

Naritza felt very lonely in the gloomy caverns where the Sanar hid themselves to keep to the ancient ways and ruled the surface Arakhopi from afar, as they had always done. Ruled everywhere, except where the dark power of the Carian menace spread itself with fear and drugs and sudden death. And the Carians encroached steadily on the Sanar's ancient domain. Soon would come the unforgiveable affront, and the Sanar would lock with the rising strength

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of the Carians in a death struggle. That time was not yet. But when Lee-grim returned from his mission to the Carian's stronghold, that struggle might break out at once. For he had been sent to get—

Naritza locked her mind on the forbidden thought. Some spy might *yarva* the secret of the thing from her mind. She dared not think of his mission.

She clasped her long, thin, webbed fingers together, and made a mind picture for herself, seeing Lee-grim as she had seen him last, going up and up the endless steps toward the jungle above. He had been clad in green leather with the Carian arm-brand, and he had looked very fine. Just like one of the Earthmen guards the Carians had hired after the prisons had been abandoned. Except that Lee-grim did not have the drug-flush, the heated, angry eye, the sneer, that marked those dissolute renegades. Men who had gone over to the Carians who had really been the agents of the Earthmen's downfall on Venus. Gone over, she knew, to get an unending supply of the drug Frondespar, which the Earthmen ignorantly called "red-honey." Ignorantly, for *Frondespar* means "bloody dew of death." It was forbidden of ancient law, but the horrible Carians used the drug to chain men's wills, to make of them obedient and unsqueamish servants. The sturdy Earthmen had great resistance to the drug, and were the most feared of the Carians' tools. Naritza gave a scornful laugh. Their bodies resisted, and their minds gave way! What spineless creatures those other Earthmen were!

* * *

Lee Grim wasn't thinking of pursuit. Curiously enough, he was thinking of honey-ants. Despising them, fearing them, liking them, admiring them—all at once. And going to them! Funny, they were the only people on all Venus, or Earth either, who had any use for him.

The people Grim called "honey-ants"—after the swollen, suspended bodies of the common Earth variety—were unknown to most Earthmen on Venus. But Grim had run into them while he still had his freedom. It had been on an errand for them he had run afoul of the Carians.

The Carian people—if they were people—were enemies of the creatures Grim called "honey-ants." And it had been the Sanar-dren mark on his ring that had decided things against him when he was caught with a drill and a bottle of soup outside the burst-open treasure vault.

Lee shuddered a little, thinking of the row on row of swollen brains of the Sanar council, seated immovable in their chairs, the bones removed from about their brains, the brains themselves stimulated by some Venusian system of feeding into an exaggerated growth, a growth beyond belief unless you saw it as Grim had seen it.

The brains were supported in a liquid; a semi-transparent tank held the liquid and the brain. The bodies of the men were atrophied, feeble caricatures of life and man-

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hood. It was horrible to look at, but those boys were smart. You had to admit their methods worked. Honey-ants, mused Grim, condemned to be living receptacles of their ancient race's long-accumulated wisdom.

He ought to be getting pretty close to the way, now. He should be seeing one of their marks, soon.

The Sanar were perhaps the only real culture on Venus. Even the greenies, though, had only a slight acquaintance with them. For the most part they looked upon the legendary rulers in the same light as Earthmen look on God—a benevolent power which somehow has little effect upon their real life, and can well be ignored. Or rather, like Earthmen look upon the legends of the troll-kings, as fairy tales best forgotten.

Grim steered carefully around a wide boil in the river current. He knew it was a big eel, and those things were carnivorous. The grey-green walls slid past, the swarming reptilian life of the jungle stuck its vari-colored heads out of the wall of leaves and watched the humming little boat go by. The Hory birds swooped and Grim did not even check the motor or duck as the great claws opened, the wide leathery wings caught air and spread right overhead, and then winged away with a raucous shout of disappointment. Earthmen did not smell right to Hory birds. Or did Hory birds do their hunting with *yarva*, too? Grim wondered how they knew he was an alien, of debatable nutritive content? How many years would it take for them to learn that Earthmen were edible even though they didn't smell like frogs, as the Venusians did?

The grey twilight deepened, the darkening veil stole across the vast breast of the now widened river. He was well into the swamp, and little islands dotted the slow sweep of the disappearing current. Pretty soon there would be no current, and there would be increasing endless repetitions of the islands, and then just mud with channels between . . . on and on. Grim shut off the strange motor and composed himself for a nap. The boat drifted on into the darkening swamp.

The lights woke him. The splash of nearing paddles didn't put him back to sleep. He lay still, hoping to be unnoticed, though it would have been smarter to have started the motor and trusted to speed to get away. The light came right on; it was too late to get going, now. The bows bumped heavily, Grim grabbed a seat brace to keep from rolling out. The big greenie held the long bow paddle high, ready to brain him if he made a hostile move. Grim lay still, listening with his deaf Earth mind for the *yarva* questions he knew were being thrown at him. *Yarva*, the Venusian thought-talk, doesn't need any interpreter, but Earthmen are not good at it. They hear it, but not clearly.

"Why should we let you pass, foreigner?" was the question as near as Grim could get it.

Grim could not mention the Sanar cavern toward which he was bound. The greenies would only

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think he was lying. He couldn't say anything about the Frondespar he was hoping to get, because few greenies trusted men addicted to its use. Not that he was an addict, he hastened to add, knowing they were hearing him think. He just needed a lift from it to remember where he was going. He couldn't say he was escaped from the Carians' prison pens; most greenies were quite ready to do the Carians a favor because they feared to get on a Carian blacklist. That meant sure death. Grim wondered if these greenies had been sent to search for him, and suppressed the thought. They didn't carry the Carian sign, the cross and round disk with the serpent curves in the center. It would have been on the soft green leather of their kilts.

Most of this thinking Grim knew he should not allow to pass in his mind, for a good *yarva* man could pick it right out of his head. But he was too worn out to hold it back. A man can hardly stop thinking except with great effort and terrific alertness. He tried to think of a good excuse for being there in a Carian boat. The motorboat was one of the Carians' few secrets left from the old time of the Aroaksig alliance.

The big man with the threatening paddle suddenly grinned. Grim knew he had been taking in every undisciplined thought in his weary head, and his head was screaming the wrong kind of thought! To Grim, the grin was a sinister mockery. It meant the man saw through him to the truth of his presence there. Then he heard a reassuring *yarva:*

"Have no fear, strange old man, we will not send you back to the place where men rot."

The big canoe moved slowly along, bumping the side of the motored craft. One of the big greenies made a line fast to the bow ring, the paddles began to cut water again. The man in the bow turned back with his light and paddle to fend off floating logs or charging saurians.

Grim fell asleep.

When he awoke it was day again; the grey, wet, hot morning. He was still in the same boat, the man in the bow still stood with the big paddle poised, the score of paddles rose and dipped. The big war canoe was cutting along as if they were all fresh as daisies. Grim sat up.

Not one head turned, not one spoke in good oral speech. Grim shivered. So he was an "old one" to the greenies now. It brought home to him again the terrible need he had for the Sanar.

In years he was only thirty. He couldn't have been in that dark hole long enough to turn into the thing of no account, the pitied, the disregarded!

Among the greenies, the old do not work and have no weight in respect, no voice in council. On Venus, to be old is to be gently shunned, generally ostracized, considered mildly crazy and wholly dependent and a not necessarily tolerated nuisance. And he looked like an old man to them now! To a greenie, old people are crazy . . .

Grim chuckled. On Earth they

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let the old people dictate everything and most innocent young fun is more or less disapproved. He wondered what some of the greybeard censors of American life would say if allowed to see a greenie mating dance. He wondered what a Bostonian moralist would do with the greenies' endless entertainments, featuring the virile and the unmentionable in all degrees. Maybe the greenies were right, and repression was really the result of centuries of senile thinking dominating all Earth life. He was sure he had heard that *yarva* thought juggled back and forth in discussion.

A skipping, dragging sound in his mind, *yarva* born—or from his fear-shot memories of the long darkness! The skipping, dragging sound of those impossible bodiless feet in the dark. For an instant he was back in his chains, shaking with fear of the things that he knew were there but which he could never see. The Carians had their secrets, perhaps as numerous and deadly and unmentionable as the Sanar's secret wisdom.

The headman's house was a little bigger, the stilt posts a little more cleverly carved, and the giggles of the peeking women were a little more restrained. Lee didn't realize until the bow-man went up the ladder ahead of him that he had had the honor of meeting the headman already. It was the one with the big paddle who had not been sure whether to bat out his brains or say "howdy, stranger."

The long-peaked house was like any other of the hundreds Lee had seen. The same froggy odor from the green skin of the greenies. The same tinkling eerie music from the web fingers of some female on their greenie version of the banjo—it was more like a balalaika than anything else. The same painted hangings made of the green-tanned deerskin. The same rushes on the floor and low reclining chairs—couches, really. The same easy welcome . . . except for one thing.

The headman waved him to a couch, and then sat down at a very un-greenie mechanical contrivance and began to twist a dial on it to several figures on the dial, very like a dial phone. But it was no phone. The metal of it was at least a thousand years old—years of hard usage, too. And the curious design shaped smoothly into that hard metal by no known method of metalworking . . .

He recognized that design. It was Sanar work, early. Probably of the Lanee empire period, the open period. Grim sat, and heaved a sigh of relief. Greenies didn't have mechanical things unless they got them from the Sanar—the Carians didn't turn loose their secrets that easily. He had been picked up by order, he realized that now. They must have gotten news of his escape immediately it occurred—by *yarva* grapevine, of course.

Over the contrivance an image began to grow, hanging in the air miraculously, projected up from the solid metal of the top by unknown electrical means. Grim wondered if it *was* electrical, or some other kind of force? The

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image was a picture, the picture was a room in the underworld of the Sanar—and the face in the center of the projection was old Many-eyes, the major-domo of the femme who had been queen when he worked for them. Hell, he still worked for them. He would have to begin to remember how to think for *yarva* sensitives again. Learn all over again. He felt so stupid and so tired.

The headman did not speak. He motioned Lee to stand near the image, which looked at him for a long minute, saying nothing. Then the head with the numerous eyes turned slightly, nodded at the headman, and was gone.

The savage touched a switch on the device, put a hand under the simple rough table on which it rested. The table reversed sides, the device fitted neatly into a hole in the floor. The hiding place would have eluded the most searching eye. It was just gone. Of course, one of the logs of the floor was hollowed out there. The rushes hid the edge of the table top which was now the bottom. Lee chuckled, thinking how many years the Earthmen had been here and still did not understand that the greenies had access to a science older than their own—but secret to the many, known to but few.

The headman called out orally: *"Vaga fleed, bog yan!"*

A young greenie girl came in, bashfully holding out a tall cup of deerhorn. It contained the familiar red sweet wine. He hoped it was spiked with *Frondespar;* he needed the strength it could give. His body trembled a little with the desire for the drug, and he knew the days when he could take it or leave it alone would be few in his present weakened condition.

He gulped it down, spilling a precious drop or two. In two minutes he was sound asleep, as he had not expected. The drug was there, plus another he had not foreseen.

* * *

When Lee awoke, he knew by the dry clean smell that he was deep underground. The light was gone. In its place was the familiar soft luminosity that takes the place of light for those used to this particular kind of darkness. His eyes adjusted easily; he had sat so long in real darkness wishing for this particular warm soft luminescence.

The honey-hunger in him was gone. He was relaxed and for the first time—in how long was it . . . years?—he felt that life was not a burden and that there was a chance that something interesting could happen to him, worth waiting for.

He rose unsteadily to his feet, when SHE came in. He stood, remembering in a vivid rush her beauty—it could not have been more than one year after all. For time had not changed her as it had changed him.

She caught her breath with a sharp intake as she saw these changes, the haggard death's head face, the matted filth of his hair, the rings of scar tissue and the fresh scabs about his wrists where the pronged chains had bit in, the bony skeletal body. Her *yarva* was strong and clear . . .

"Please sit down, Grim-man!

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You must be very weak. Let your respect be tempered with consideration for yourself. You will need long care to replace the strength they have stolen from you. We can never heal away all the hurt, of course!"

Grim sat, and something like tears came into his eyes. He felt the weakness wet his cheeks shamefully. He coughed, dragged his palms across his eyes, leaned back in the soft padded green leather. His heart swelled. He felt that life was wonderful and that Hope was not a mad crone squatting in the corner. He spread his hands in a meaning gesture.

"I can't help being too glad to be welcome, Naritza." Then he managed to make *yarva* talk. His mind did that double shuffle all Earthmen find necessary to ready it for sending telepathic messages. "I mean *Queen* Naritza. You must think I have failed in my mission and come to you as a beggar and a failure in the one thing you asked of me. Yet you make me welcome! I am glad to tell you I did not fail."

Naritza sprang to her feet from the low stool where she had dropped in front of his chair. Her hands clasped together, her mouth was a round "O" of surprise. He wondered if she were acting, to make him feel that at last he had succeeded in what had long been a secret ambition . . . to pull something that *yarva* could not detect.

"Always your thought has been that you have failed! You should not have done that. If we had known we could have raided that foul den of the Carian night bats!" She stopped, her eyes shifting from his in embarrassment.

It was really superb. That is, if they did know he had had it with him all the time. But he had made a habit of thinking of his "failure" and it had been that thought that saved him from torture he would never have survived. The Carians had never suspected his mission had succeeded.

Lee picked up the little clip of razor blades from his things, lying still on the table where he had left them. He would soon know how long it had been, for Venusian time recording had little in common with his own weeks and months. They would say it had been from Dan to Dar, and that Dan was forty days and Dar ninety, and there were eight other periods, all different, in between . . . and he would give up trying to figure it out in Earth time. His mind didn't exactly work any more. But it would . . .

He slid out a blade, placed it on the scar on his calf, made a quick deep slash. The blade gritted on the stone. He pressed the flesh, and the thing popped out. The Queen swooped with a cry of delight and seized it from the floor. Lee quietly fainted. He was too weak to stand even that much pain.

When he opened his eyes all that superb symmetry of HER was gone, he was alone. But not for long.

Many-eyes, the old aroaksig servant, came gliding. His eerie musculature seemed greyer, his height was less, he had shrunken and

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changed since Lee had gone away. What a strange outlandish frame his was! Lee wondered if there were bones inside that brown leather hide, or something else? He couldn't fathom just what Many-eyes really was—beast, bug, fish or snake—but certainly he was not connected with the human race except in habits. Only his size was similar to the human. Many-eyes began to draw water for his bath, and then to apply ointments to his numerous small wounds taken in his short passage through the jungle to the boats. Lee made his way to the sunken stone pool in the floor, let his naked body in gingerly. Many-eyes began to scrub him vigorously with a long handled brush. Lee cussed him amiably, and Many-eyes never cracked an expression on that mask-like insect face of his. Lee knew the history of his ancient race, knew that of all the hidden wisdom of the planet, perhaps the most important was hidden in his horrible head.

"Do you do this for everybody, Many-eyes?" asked Lee, in *yarva* talk. "Or is this a signal honor? I always took you for a being far above such mundane tasks."

The *yarva* from that strange old head was weak, almost apologetic, and somehow familiar, though Lee could not remember ever talking with him before.

"Queen Naritza say, me do. She like you, I like you. You are weak and sick, I will make you well with aroaksig drugs, known to no other. Could you be in better hands?"

Lee couldn't say no. Old Many-eyes probably knew more about medicine as well as science than the smartest of their bottled big-brains reposing in the Hall of the Council or the "Hall of the Honey-ants," as Lee called it. Lee drank the big bowl of fluid he brought greedily. He knew the aroaksig had put in it all the healing art of his race. And they were regarded and feared as the greatest and the most powerful wizards by the greenies who had succeeded in wiping out the last of their once immense nations.

Lee wondered vaguely how that had been done. The greenies had no great science. It was probably the ancestors of these same Sanar bottled brains who had turned the trick against the power of the aroaksig. It was probable that Many-eyes had come to this place in chains as a captive, and had outlived his captors, as well as his people and their war for survival.

Lee Grim fell asleep in the water, but it was not the drugs Many-eyes had given him. It was just plain exhaustion.

* * *

Naritza had slipped the tiny red gem from Grim's slashed leg into a slot in the projection device. On the wall of her *farin-drom* the device was now making a huge map of the many tiny marks on the gem. Beneath the relief map of the surface of Venus were a series of wriggly lines. These were the network of caves beneath the surface. On one of those dark wiggly lines was a round red dot. She cried out with joy when she spotted it.

For three centuries the Sanar

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had been trying to get this gem from the Carian treasure house without letting the creatures of darkness learn what it was!

The Earthman had been a natural for the job which had cost them so many agents, with his Earth knowledge of cracksman methods unknown on Venus. With his Earthman's innocence of *yarva* sensitivity making it possible to tell him what to get without revealing to him inadvertently the importance or the nature of the gem he was to steal. A Venusian of sharp *yarva* intelligence would have found it impossible not to ferret out from an instructing mind the concealed knowledge of what was on the gem. The agents they had sent previously had not known exactly what they were looking for, and they had failed. Had failed even to get into the storehouse of Carian treasure, let alone select from all the many gathered things the one thing needed.

She took the gem out of the projection slot, and with it in her hand sprinted with un-queenly speed down the dim corridor to the great hall of the brains. She put the gem into the slot of a much larger device there, her whole slender, beautiful body trembling with eagerness. Through her mind the massed supplication of the seated council, unmoving acolytes, immovable masters of the stored thoughts of past centuries pulsed in *yarva* so strong she could only deny them by not thinking at all. She switched on the light, and a grave sigh of relief from all the living dead there rewarded her. After a second she switched off the light again.

A profound silence where before had been a vibrant inquiry. The whole vast vault of the chamber echoed with the thankful silence, the accolade of deep emotional stasis, seldom given except for the most able work of the greatest benefit to the race of the Sanar. She wished Grim were here to feel that warm silence and know that always he would be the hero of all time to the Sanar. They knew and the Carian evil did not know! They had a fighting chance now! Before there had been only a waiting till their weakness became known, a matter of time.

* * *

"For this," murmured Naritza, "the ancient nation of the Sanar will give you anything you can wish for . . . and almost anything you *can* wish for is within our power."

Grim grinned, the first real smile that had crossed his face in —how long was it, anyway?

"Like the fairy tales, eh? Not three wishes, but an unlimited number of wishes? And you are the queen of the serpents, or of the fairies . . . giving me anything I wish in return for a service. As I recall the stories, there was always a catch to it. You had to make the wishes very carefully or you fell afoul of some dirty work. What's the catch, Naritza?"

Her face saddened a little.

"The catch, dear Earthman, is that you may never leave us. Since you know about the gem and what

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is upon it, you may not go where they might catch you. They would not be so obtuse again, and we cannot risk it. Otherwise, anything within our power to grant is yours."

"Even you, Naritza?"

His meaning, none too subtly put in *yarva*-talk, his Earth mind clumsy and inept in the customary circumlocutory picturing of delicate subjects, made her face flush with embarrassment for an instant. But the blush was gone as swiftly as it had come. She did not smile, and her eyes were very grave upon his, very sweet, and not at all yielding.

"Even myself, if you insist, Lee Grim. But our customs and taboos are very rigid, and if the council of the minds sees wrong in it, it would not be granted. I am supposed to be wed only to one whose nature would most greatly forward the power and the well-being of the Sanar mind-peoples. To the council of the minds, our mating would look like the mating of a wild boar to an orchid. They look upon you as a talented savage, product of a young and ignorant people and not suited to our ancient cultured life pattern. They are grateful, but they would be greatly shocked if you made such a request."

"Nevertheless, Naritza, I make that request! If they do not see fit to grant me the one thing that I ask, how then suppose that their rewards are ever anything but sops thrown to fools who do not know enough to ask for just wages?"

Her face was now bright pink with embarrassment. That vital, utterly symmetrical body of hers was poised on tip-toe, as if she would rather run than stand there facing him who so crudely demanded what the long, long centuries of Sanar culture had been at such pains to produce — herself, Naritza, daughter of the ancient line of rulers, shaped and fitted by the work of so many, for so long, to her task. He knew he was being a beast to make such a demand. Nevertheless he had suffered, and other than herself there were few women on all Venus who would please him. There was greenie blood in the lower classes of the Sanar, and the greenies smelled like frogs. However dainty and lovely they might be to a Venusian, Grim didn't want any. But Naritza was of the old blood; and the old families of the Sanar had lived underground so long the green of their skin was no longer the protective hide of a greenie, but of soft light green texture, not at all like a frog's skin. Besides all that, in all his life he had had no real affection for any woman but Naritza. Lee mused upon all this, standing there waiting for her to speak. Finally he said:

"Don't you know you are the only woman on Venus or Earth either who is shaped to my desires? Are you so *yarva* blind you do not read that in me? What request did you think I would make? For drugs, for the red fluid of mind death? For drunkenness? For the rough hides of a dozen greenie women? For gold, when I can go nowhere to spend it? If you are so

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unapproachable and holy that one may never touch you, where can I find your like? Do similar lovely creatures hide in the caverns of your ancient race awaiting my approach? Where then are they?"

"No, Lee-grim, I am the only one, or almost the only one. In the far south are others of the old blood lines, but you could never find them. I will put your request to the council. But I know their answer will be an evasion. The man who marries me will become in all legality the ruler of the Sanar. They would not want to put their necks under an Earthman's foot, Lee-grim!"

* * *

The expedition to the place marked on the map of the gem was formed of many tall surface greenies, members of the Anand surface tribe. There was also old Many-eyes, Naritza's personal servant and representative here, and three of the younger of the council, those still vigorous enough in body to stand the trip. Their brains were not yet of an unwieldy size, though they had to be protected by being carried in sedan chairs. The chairs were equipped with special basket-work rests for their heads.

There was also the animal called Grond. He was a tremendous thing, used for tracking by the Anand hunters. His color was grey, and to Lee he was more akin to an Earth lion than anything else. He was more dog than cat, but he was more besides. He was a *yarva*-trained beast, very old for his kind, and with wise eyes that sent shivers down the back, great round eyes above a square, saliva-dripping mouth. It was a mouth set with square-cut even teeth in a double row. They constituted a set of as efficient bone crushers as could be imagined. His eyes, darting back and forth with that true Venusian jungle watchfulness, never missed the slightest movement, or sound, *or inimical thought,* in the immediate surroundings. Grim sometimes stroked the monstrous creature, making much of him out of self protection, for his alien smell seemed to worry the beast. He was always looking at Grim as if he couldn't quite remember what his smell reminded him of—and not quite sure that when he remembered it would be good.

They had turned three times to the right and traveled many miles of the ancient deserted caverns, were making ready to embark upon an underground stream. There were three long canoes; they had been carried all that way on the husky greenie shoulders. The Anands were decorated for the war-path, their customs in this not unlike American Indians. The Anand warriors painted with wide zig-zag bands of bright pink, startling upon their green skins. Across their faces the weird zig-zag made masks of quite acceptable ferocity. Grim could see where the pink markings would conceal slight wounds in battle, which could have a use in preserving morale, he guessed.

The attack came silently, at first. They must have used blow guns to open the onslaught, for the tall greenies loading the canoe at the

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water's edge began to drop into the water without a sound. Except for hearing the skipping, dragging sound that was so familiar, Grim would not have realized what was up. He yelled "Down, we're attacked!" in thunderous echoing tones before he remembered no one would even understand the English words.

Grim crouched behind the proud curve of the carved prow of a canoe, peering for the source of the death that had struck. Then the explosions came, one after another, all about. He remembered that the Carians had perfected the explosive needle gun, which was really a highly developed blow gun, with an explosive added to the dart. They had used a silent poison in the first needles thrown, to delay recognition, he imagined. It had probably given them time to get several more warriors before they realized they were being attacked.

Grim tugged out his own Carian hand gun, began to pull trigger toward the imagined source of the fire. He had heard the weird, familiar sound of Carian movement overhead, on a ledge above their own beside the river, farther down stream. One of his shots found a mark. The skipping stopped and a shrill scream of unearthly timbre echoed and re-echoed across the rock roof of the rushing stream.

The fear he had carried so long, fear of that unseen presence of Carians—shrank within him. Maybe you couldn't see them, but they could be hurt! They were made of flesh, whatever they were.

From the hands of old Many-eyes a long beam of light flashed suddenly up to that ledge whence the scream had issued. The greenies poured a cloud of darts from their blow-guns upon the shadowy figures clustered there in the light beam. Blue-black bodies began to leap in agony, began to melt away like black furs in a furnace. Several sprawled, end over end, tumbling down from the ledge into the hurrying water. Little black wings flopped in the water horribly, the wide ghoul eyes of them rolled in death as they sank. Grim felt a retching, familiar to him, yet new, now that he saw them. Now he knew what they looked like!

The true Carian was not a powerful, invisible and fearful creature of wizardry, but a bat-like animal of black fur and wings that enabled it to get about in darkness as if invisible. The skipping, dragging step Grim saw now was due to the pads of its feet being attached to the wings, which ran all along the body's length in the way a flying squirrel's wings are attached.

These were the second most advanced race of old Venus, mused Grim, picking one of the shadows off the ledge, and they were certainly nothing to worry overmuch about, to pull such a stupid ambush. The horror they aroused, he saw, was due to a sensed lack of ordinary animal goodness and naturalness about them. They were some ancient thing, long survived past its meridian, something in which the decay of evil had become the will, the moving pattern.

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Black of skin, with their soft bat fur making them invisible to all reflected light, made them hard to see and harder to hit.

They must have expected fewer of the Sanar, or had in fact not expected them at all, but been surprised themselves. Hid on the upper ledge, they had started firing because they *yarva'd* that one of the Sanar had detected them. The man who noticed them was of course the first to die. *Yarva* worked that way, as Grim had noticed to his discomfiture more than once.

They had made the gun he was firing, and it was a good accurate gun, carefully made, finely decorated. Deadly in effect, Grim knew that such weapons had helped to decide Earthmen in abandoning their attempts to tame Venus. Too many Earthmen had died without trace of their assailants. Earthmen had given up hope of uncovering their hidden enemies on Venus. This gun carried a load of ammunition in its handle to last for hours of this kind of firing. It had the virtue of making its noise at the point of contact, and none at the source of impetus.

The deadly little needles were exploding all about him. Grim scrabbled closer to the water, putting the whole high prow of the canoe between himself and the accurate fire. Just what did they want? Couldn't they get away?

The answer came quickly, as a half-dozen slim shapes launched themselves in gliding flight, swooping down like chunks of sliding darkness, impossible to see clearly enough to hit. They struck all in a heap about the beam of light old Many-eyes was carrying. The light Many-eyes had held steadily upon them as they descended went out. Then they rose, heavily, carrying the frail old being. It was Many-eyes' knowledge they were after!

Grim fired as rapidly as he could. There were at least six carrying the old one. He got two, and the others sagged with their burden into the water near mid-stream.

A flight of other dark shapes launched from the ledge, splashed into the water like so many flung stones, carrying captors and captive alike beneath the rushing surface. They did not come up again within Grim's vision, limited by the half-dozen glow-lamps' dim beams. He snatched up the stronger device carried by Many-eyes, lying where he had dropped it, sent the beam after the vanished swimmers—but there was nothing.

They had what they had come for: knowledge of their expedition and its purpose—in the person of old Many-eyes. Grim cursed, and Naorld, the head-man of the Anands — the same who had once nearly crushed his head with a paddle—looked at Grim sadly, exchanging with him a rather strange message of condolence. If Grim could have read that mind aright, he would really have torn his hair! But Grim did not know who Many-eyes really was, and Anand held his peace. He himself had only guessed it recently.

"Get 'em, Grond!" growled Lee, and Naorld repeated the order to the animal.

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He was off like a windmill, churning water as he arrowed toward mid-stream. There he went under like an otter, and so from their ken for a time. But Grim knew that between the beast and Naorld a thin string of *yarva* sensitivity held strong as a cable. Both knew the other's thought constantly, which was strange to observe for the first time.

Naorld barked an oral order. The remaining warriors swung into their places along the canoes. They shoved off onto the swift rushing breast of the ancient river. Paddles dipped and gleamed, the tall scowling prows of carved Lel wood began to sway to the strokes of the angry warriors. But one long canoe remained, and beside it lay enough dead to man it twice over. There were no cries, only a grim pursuing silence.

Grond surfaced once, far ahead, then dived under and they swung to follow on his trail. But an hour passed, and there was no more sign of Grond, nor sign or sound of the enemy. They paddled on. Grim knew that he was like a blind man with men who possessed eyes. Their sensitive minds had some scent of the quarry ahead. He knew that Grond was in constant contact and could find them at any time he returned. Yet it was all mysterious darkness, silent threatening water, splash and sweep of paddles, bending backs, bunching of arm muscles and leaping of the slim canoes—to no visible purpose that his senses could detect.

"How did they know the aroaksig was our ruler?" moaned Naorld, in oral words of the Anand dialect. Grim caught the curious, impossible meaning by chance. He strained his mind to question the big chief, whose face was set in a grimace of despair—somehow like a child's face, full of the utter despair of which only a child is capable. The man would not give him a plain answer, and Grim realized that he had inadvertently uttered some secret that even himself was not supposed to know.

How could the old servant-like hanger-on of the Sanar palace be the ruler? Wise, yes, and a kind of scientist of many parts, knowing many things unknown to any others but his race, a race that had passed on, taking their knowledge with them except for such as Many-eyes. But for him to be the ruler, where he had always been the captive, the slave, the servant! Had it been his custom to hide his identity as ruler behind the role of servant?

"Sometime you will understand this, Earthman, if you should live long enough. I cannot tell you; the secret is not mine to divulge," grunted Naorld, between paddle strokes, pulling deep, scanning the dark water ahead, reaching with his *yarva* sense for the big animal they had unleashed on the trail.

Grim could not recover his mental equilibrium. Old Many-eyes, whom he had condescendingly allowed to scrub his back—the ruler of the immense and ancient power of the Sanar? And he had thought the queenly young Naritza was hereditary queen by royal descent! Strange people. When would their

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surprises cease? The ugliest, most unassuming, most completely shunned creature in all the palace crew—was after all this time discovered to him as the real ruler! He was glad, now. He had always been humorously fond of the queer-looking creature, feeling a kinship because like himself he was an alien to his surroundings.

"I'm glad Naritza didn't come," murmured Grim. "It could have been her they took instead of the old insect."

Naorld gave him a curious glance of complete scorn, as if his brain were one that should be turned in on a new one. The big Grond surfaced right ahead of the canoe, and they backed water, helped the animal aboard.

One of the "tank" brains, slung in a kind of low hammock in the center of the big canoe, began to give off commands in a shrill penetrating *yarva* voice that even Grim could hear.

The canoe picked up speed again, and Grim pondered the *yarva* command: "To the place of the gem-map, there we will find what is needed to bring back our Master." He hadn't meant master, though. He had used the feminine of the word. Could it be old Many-eyes was a female of his near-extinct species?

It was too much for Grim. He knew that a journey such as this, for the living-dead bodies of the big-brained men, was a thing undertaken only because of some immense need for their presence. None other could take their place, or they would not be here. Yet the Carians had abducted the one member of the party whom Grim had considered least important, fondly believing the old creature had only come along to tend to his own personal needs. The ruler! Grim shook his head in wonder.

Mile after mile of the underground waterway passed gloomily by, lit only by their own dim glowing beams from the ancient glow-lamps. Grim wondered what was in the graved metal bowls of the lamps to give off endlessly so much light—and did not ask, for their usual answers to such questions were so involved that Grim believed they did not know themselves.

The passing of centuries had left their marks on the timeless walls, walls cut deep with many ancient bas-reliefs, writings, and an occasional full sculpture in a niche. These were things whose meanings were lost to all living things, Grim suspected, and much of it was aroaksig work, incomprehensible to any human mind.

The river had kept the same level so much of the time it had cut away the rock everywhere as evenly as if cut with a rock saw, and chiseled out neatly in a deep round, beneath the surface. The current was steady, rapid but not turbulent; just that silent resistless push, onward into the depths of Venus' rock heart. The water surface gleamed like a polished mirror, throwing back the glow-lamps' light in curiously weird distortion.

The canoes swung about a long curve, backed water abruptly,

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headed into a dark opening against the current. Over the opening a strange symbol glowed phosphorescently. In the center of the character was a round, red dot.

This was the place, the goal of their journey, the location of the trove marked on the ancient map on the gem he had stolen. It was also the place the Carians had selected for another ambush. They were clustered on the projections of the rocky roof, hanging like bats, unnoticed until the canoes were directly underneath. Then they dropped, in long swooping curves, firing as they glided past at close quarters. How had they known they would turn up here? Did they know the goal of their journey? Was it a fool's errand they had undertaken, a Carian trap? Grim wondered, but he was too busy firing at the gliding shadows of their ghostly attackers to think deeply.

As the numbers of swooping shadows decreased, he deduced that they had accidentally selected the same route used by the Carians in escaping with their captive, and so had run afoul of a force set to delay their pursuit. The warriors took up their paddles as the last of the Carians glided off into the darkness, resumed the journey.

But Grim knew that they were followed, watched constantly by distant gliding, turning figures, that they would be under large scale attack as soon as forces could be brought. He set himself to pick off these distant gliding shadows, but soon gave it up. They were impossible to hit in the darkness.

Another mile of hard paddling against the current brought them to their journey's end. A shelf of rock jutted out into the current, with low mooring pillars of seemingly carved wood, time-eaten, deep-cut with rope marks of a time now forgotten. He touched the wood, making fast the mooring line. It was not wood at all, but stone made in a curiously perfect imitation of wood. Even the bark had been imitated by laborious minute carving.

The sedan chairs of the three minds from the Council were lifted out, the helpless creatures lifted into them like babes. A slight blow could cause those minds serious concussion, he saw. The party formed a double line, warriors to the number of a score going ahead, the rest behind. They carried blow guns ready-fitted with the poison darts, their eyes searched the dimness apprehensively, Grim knew this trip had been wearing down their savage stoicism to the breaking point. It would not take much of that silent, deadly attack now to finish them off, and they knew it.

Behind them, as they moved upward along a low tunnel, Grim heard the skipping steps as Carians glided to the stone wharf, looked over their boats. If they shoved them off, they would be marooned, and Grim called out in English.

"The boats are being sabotaged, can't you *yarva* as well with your heads as I can hear with my ears?"

"I will go back, guard the boats," grunted a warrior beside Grim in Anand—and turned back with a half-dozen of his fellows. Grim

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wondered if they had shirked the duty of watching the boats because of fear? But as the six returned, he saw the shadows of the Carian spies lift from the shelf, glide away over the water. There were but three or four of them.

But a short distance onward the passage ended. It was a great square doorway, bare of ornamentation, and over it glowed the red gem that seemed the symbol of whatever it was the Sanar sought here.

From within the doorway came at short intervals a deep moaning vibration, somewhat like a foghorn at a distance. The door itself was metal. There was no handle, no key hole, no hinges, no bolts—nothing by which to open it. It was one massive sheet of bronze-colored metal, pitted slightly with a greenish corrosion. The men stood, looking at Grim with puzzled faces, looking at the three brains in their slung chairs, helpless now that the goal was reached. And Grim remembered that he had been originally hired by the Sanar to crack open just such a door to a treasure house of the Carians, to get the original gem. From the baggage packs they brought his kit of earth tools, stood waiting confidently. He was supposed to open the door, and up till now they had not even mentioned the fact to him.

Lee Grim chuckled a little bitterly. Of course it had not occurred to them to brief him orally, they had probably flung a message at him in *yarva* and assumed that he had heard when he did not reply. And that satchel of burglar tools of his was as bare of nitro as Mother Hubbard's cupboard!

He stood, the open satchel in front of him, staring at the enigmatic door of some ancient hardened metal, knowing it was nearly as tough as the best tool steel, some unknown ancient alloy. He cursed his grandmother, the absent-minded one, for having passed the trait on to him.

From the darkness a needle of light flickered, exploded against the metal. He ducked sidewise, clawing rock to get out of the line of fire, jerking out the little handgun of Carian workmanship, looking for something in the blackness to fire toward. The warriors formed a circle around him, blowguns elevated at an angle, and Naorld swung the stronger beam of the aroaksig light in a great arc, revealing the three flying shadows circling just beneath the roof. It was their purpose to delay the opening of this cache until their brothers brought more force.

Grim looked down at the gun in his hand, puzzling how he was supposed to open that door with no equipment but a hand drill, a small jimmy, a doctor's stethoscope, an assortment of superhard bits, a litter of assorted electrical tools all useless here with no power. He wondered why he had brought these special electrical tools to Venus anyway? Had he thought the Venusians would have light sockets convenient to their money boxes?

He examined the door again, noting the spot where the Carian

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explosive needle had bitten a round gouge out of the stuff—it wasn't so hard, at that! Suddenly the idea struck him, he jerked the magazine from the handle of his own Carian gun. There were a good fifty of the needles still remaining. He had his nitro right with him, after all, and maybe he could open that door!

He applied the stethoscope, tapping the door lightly all over, listening to the echoes in the metal, figuring out the location of the hinges and the locking bars inside. He would have only one charge to do this job. It had to be placed exactly right.

He picked the spot, began to drill a series of holes in a circle, pointing the drill toward the center. He would have only concussion to set off that charge. They would have to be close together.

He filled each hole with the tiny potent needles, left ten in the magazine. Then he stood back, sighted carefully, fired into the drill hole at the top. The resulting detonation was satisfactorily loud, the Anand warriors all dropped flat as if shot, then stood up sheepishly, eyeing Grim a little reproachfully for forgetting to *yarva* his intentions to them.

The force had blasted a great hole into the metal, from the hole streamed a flow of unearthly light, liquid flickering stuff seeming almost material. Grim put his hand to the edges of the ruptured metal, tugged at the door. Abruptly it slid sidewise, smoothly as if oiled, on rollers apparently.

Grim stepped through, looking over the back of the great door to check his preconceived ideas of the locking mechanism. His explosive had been planted directly over the round lock in the center, and had blown the whole mechanism loose. It had been a good guess, but an inch more to the left and that door would have held!

Naorld stepped through, his face a smile of complete approbation of Grim's skill. Grim wondered if he had *yarva'd* all that doubt and puzzlement in his mind, and was now acting as if Grim's success was premeditated. After him came the three chairs of the helpless big heads. Their chorus of pleased *yarva* made Grim look over the treasure they had come so far to seek.

There was a glow of unearthly, dancing firelight, over the whole chamber, and the many surfaces of the strange objects were a dazzling multiplicity of polished facets of peculiar geometrical pattern. It was stuff somewhat like sheets of glowing stainless steel, fitted together in a number of devices whose use Grim could not even guess at. But these mysterious devices were not what the expedition had come for.

Naorld began to pick up square-cut helmets from a neat stack, one by one, issuing one to each man. Grim knew he was missing all the conversation, that the minds in the chairs were directing Naorld, explaining the use and purpose of each article, directing how they were to be used.

There was body armor, severely plain, but shaped to the peculiarly

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hideous body structure of the aroaksig. This must be one of the crypts of that vanished, enigmatic insect race! What lay here could be known in detail only to an aroaksig, and their own Many-eyes was now in the Carian dungeons, if he had lived this long. Grim guessed they would have to get him out of Carian hands before they would know what to do with the bulk of this material. But he was wrong.

As Grim slipped the helmet handed him over his ears, the world as he knew it vanished, to be replaced by another of wide plains of limpid light, many-colored, with queer comings and goings of bands of irridescence. He could see, with the helmet on, right through the rocks, but there was little to see that meant anything to him. Far off a line of flying winged shapes swept along above a band of rushing white light! After a second he guessed what they were—Carians, flying to complete their destruction of this expedition! That meant he was seeing them through solid rock more than a mile away! That rushing band of white light was the river they had traversed, not the slower stream outside this crypt, but the bigger river it joined.

"The helmet of search," murmured the big watching braincase. "Now take up the spears of light, and we will not need to fear the Carian deviltry again."

Naorld obeyed the *yarva* orders, selecting from a leaning stack of objects long metallic white wands, which he handed to each warrior. Grim took his, examined it. One end was a rounded blunt point, the other bore a lever along the handle, to fit into the palm as the fist closed. Grim closed his palm about this grip, and from the blunt tip shot a fierce bolt of terrific, blazing power. Grim dropped the thing in startled amaze, looked up at the ceiling where he expected to see the rock burnt away. Still with the "helmet of search" on his head, the path of the spear of light glowed redly, on and on, as far as his eye could see.

Grim slipped off the helmet, looked up with his naked eye. There was nothing to be seen but the dimlit surface of the rock, unmarred except by a minute discoloration.

Naorld's big webbed fingers bit into his bicep:

"Do not fire the spear yet! We will pick off those flying horrors from here, with this ancient power!"

There were scores of marvels in this treasure house from Venus' unknown past that Grim wanted time to examine.

"You will not leave this unguarded? If this place falls to those bats of the night, they would wipe us out in minutes!"

"Half will remain, Grim! With these weapons, our force will be sufficient to blast the Carian stronghold itself—and there is our ruler to rescue from their torture—we cannot wait! Come!"

* * *

That trip, on down that grim and silent river to the depths of darkness where the true heart of the Carian power lay, was one

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Grim would never forget. There was only the silent rush of the water, the rise and fall of the paddles, the strange walls with their ancient inscriptions and sculptures. There was only the rushing silence—but that was engraved on his mind forever.

Naorld called a halt when they came upon an upreaching slope of red-veined granite with great steps cut in, reaching up and up into the darkness. Once it had led to a city of long-vanished Venusians, but now it led up to the city-lair of the animal-like Carians, furred and grisly, ghoul-like in their habits of silence and secrecy. There were scores of the Carian motor boats drawn up on the shelving granite. There was a rank smell of Carian musk. There was a tension of watchfulness—but no sign of life.

"First we will have to meet the Earthmen the cowardly bat-things have hired to do their fighting!" growled Naorld in Anand oral talk, so that Grim would catch his meaning.

"That is a meeting I have long awaited," *yarva'd* Lee Grim, the old hatred of the brutal guards of the Carian prison rising up again, that lean, scarred wolf of rage bursting the leash on which he had held it so long. "Some of those Earthmen were hirelings of the Carians long before Earth gave up her colonies here, were instruments of death to all Earth's hopes on Venus. Maybe Earth will get her revenge on some of those traitors!"

They pressed on, up and up the endless series of steps hewn out of the solid red granite so long ago. In the distance solid bold figures of red stone marked the walls of the ancient city the Carians had adopted for their stronghold. Few men had seen this place, the Carians preferring to keep all but trusted hirelings at the farthest distance possible.

Lee dropped the "helmet of search" over his eyes again. It gave him a picture of the reality before him as vague to his mind as an x-ray to a novice, but even more confusing. Nothing was as it should be. He lifted the helmet again, made out his true position, and dropped it again. He wanted to see both the outside and the interior works of reality, and he realized now why there were three little holes in the solid metal of the helmet. The race of the aroaksig had had many eyes, some six or seven of different sizes arranged about their weird heads. He saw now that they reserved three of them for seeing with normal vision, used the rest to see with these helmets right through the substance of matter.

Upon the towering red stone walls lines of crouching creatures waited, ready to fling themselves in aerial dives upon the attackers when the time was right. Outside the walls, a row of machine-gun emplacements, Earth style, of concrete, with both vertical and lateral slits for firing. The green-clad guards lounged idly, confidently, waiting their nearer approach before entering the confines of the pill boxes. Grim grinned, an exultation and a sense of righteous

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retribution burning in his breast. Were that gang of skunks going to be surprised!

As the green-clad figures began to slip into the low doorways, closing them, the barrels of the heavy guns swung, here and there they fired a clip to warm the guns and get the feel of the range. Grim held up his hand. The ricochets from those shots were uncomfortably close. They were firing down upon them, and they knew how to handle those guns!

"Let 'em have it," he growled to Naorld in English. "Why waste more good men on the likes of that crew?"

Naorld made a cutting motion with his right webbed hand, sighted with his own spear of light, and from each slender wondrous weapon burst a terrible beam of the strange fire of the ancients.

Grim could not resist slipping up his helmet to see the results of that strange, fearful volley.

Along the walls the black hideous shapes of the Carians were dropping, fluttering in death, tumbling down and down with lax wings, over and over. In the pill boxes the leaping guns quieted. He could guess the surprise on those besotted faces as death came from the unseen beams. To his naked eyes, there was no sight or sound of the force that was killing the enemy. The rays were invisible!

He dropped his helmet, watched the brilliant white shafts dance and arc and seek out ever one more victim. And even as he watched, he saw there were no more living things to bar their way into the strongest city on Venus—strongest by reputation of deadliness, if not in fact.

Their party of less than fifty warriors marched on up the slope, wary of the easy victory, but nothing appeared to bar their way. Grim searched deeper with the x-ray vision of the helmet, down into the rocky base of the great old city. There was scurrying, swarming movement, a rushing and a gathering and a swift flight away into the hidden depths beneath; the Carians were leaving.

Grim shouted aloud, began to sweep his spear across the multitudinous movement, watched the strange shapes of the Carians drop before the spear of light as if scorched instantly to death.

After a time the last of them was gone. The whole city lay before them empty of life. The rage within him died away, but an exultation, and a vengeance not yet satisfied, remained.

They flung ropes with grapples to the top of the walls, swarmed up, opened the gates. They marched into an empty city of dead black-winged creatures. The Carian power would not soon again show its secretive hand, Lee felt.

Grim began systematically to search the endless stinking warrens, his helmet giving him sight through all the walls, making the task, hopeless otherwise, extremely simple. He wanted very much to find the old aroaksig, Many-eyes, and question him about the nature of the things still in that crypt. Also he wanted to know what he

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meant by being a ruler, and not telling Lee Grim who he was! Curious creature. Likeable trait, at that.

A movement in that endless repetition of chambers caught his eye, a flash of light in the glass-like appearance the helmet gave to matter. One small cluster of the red whorls he had come to know meant life of the Greenie type—he wondered if the aroaksig also made the same kind of image on the helmet vision? He lifted the helmet, went rapidly toward that place.

Old Many-eyes lay in the round rock cell, bound hand and foot. Grim bent over him, cutting loose the twisted ropes, saying:

"So you're the real boss of the whole shebang, you old faker! Why didn't you tell me you were the real ruler, instead of washing my filthy back like a servant?"

The hideous mask-like face turned, peering at him with two bright eyes, the other eyes dull and vacant and glassy. A shiver went along Lee's spine. There was something very queer about this creature. The two eyes that glistened at him so softly, so beautifully, so tenderly, could never belong to any insect-beast out of the time-wasted past!

Clumsily the old living fossil got to his feet with Lee's aid, stretching his limbs with strange grace for one so obviously stiffened. The thing did not speak. Strain his mind as he might, Lee could detect no *yarva* thought from that weird head. It clung weakly to Grim's shoulder, the ugly horned hands clasping shakily.

"What did they do to you, old fellow?" asked Lee, thinking he must be badly hurt, perhaps near death. "You know, I've missed you, not that I ever expected to until I saw the damn bats fly away with you! And especially when they said you were the ruler. You could have knocked me— I thought that sharp young Naritza was the queen-to-be!

"Look, Many-eyes, you can do me a big favor. You're in Naritza's confidence, and you could recommend me as a husband, you know. If she isn't queen, I don't see what objection anyone would have? You could get it thoroughly through her head that I'm in love with her— Well, say something! Aren't you even glad to see me?"

The ancient death-like mask of the insectoid being peered and nodded assent, and a husky feeble voice like no other Lee had ever heard from him murmured: "I am sure Naritza will marry you, Lee-grim. Just keep after her!"

The creature had spoken Anand orally, and Lee understood well enough, though there was something decidedly odd about the timbre of its voice.

Even as Grim stood there, trying to figure out the weird angles of this thing, Naorld rushed into the cell, threw himself at the ugly creature's feet, embraced the horned, horrible knees. Then he stood up, his face an agony of anxiety, placed both big webbed hands to Many-eyes' weird head, and tugged! The head came off in his hands!

Naritza raised her lovely, long,

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webbed hands to her tangled, damp hair, and blushed as pretty a pink as Grim had ever seen on a green skin before.

"Have they harmed you, Highness?" begged Naorld, in an agony of shame that this should have happened to his queen while under his protection. "My life is forfeit, loved ruler, if they have harmed one hair of your head!"

Naorld continued an unintelligible harangue, but Grim staggered back against the wall, his head spinning in puzzlement. Naritza glanced at his shocked, open-mouthed astonishment, and broke into a storm of rippling laughter. After a moment, Naorld, reassured by her laughter, looked at Grim and broke into the easy greenie bellow of merriment.

Grim was suddenly angry at the way he had been taken in. He strode to the queen, whom he had never before touched except with profound respect, caught her to him in an embrace, planted a long hearty kiss upon her lips. Naorld seized him by the shoulder, whirled him back against the wall, held him there while he looked at the queen for instructions. Lee knew his forward act could be the death of him, even after the work he had done for them. He *yarva'd* desperately:

"As I recall, the aroaksig masquerade said that Naritza would marry me. I have a right to kiss my affianced, every right in the Venusian calendar!"

Naritza went on straightening her damp hair, dimpling slyly at Grim, held helpless against the wall in Naorld's huge grasp.

"I will marry you on one condition, dear Lee-grim. That condition—that we go to Earth for our honeymoon!"

"Earth? Why, Naritza, the council—"

"Exactly, my husband. To get me back again they will have to grant my right to marry whom I please. Do you consent?"

"I consented a long time ago, Naritza! Now, Naorld, get your big hands off my windpipe and vamoose. We want to be alone!"

Naritza smiled sweetly at Naorld, who released Grim and stood embarrassedly, smiling with a shy stupidity.

"You'd better treat your king-to-be with more respect, good Naorld, or he will find a new chief for the Anand people!" Naritza smiled at him, and he went out, grinning like a huge boy.

Their kiss was very sweet, and Grim knew again he would never cease learning new things about Venusians' ways, and the ways of women.

THE END

ATMOSPHERE REVISION

REMEMBER when we went to school—they told us the atmosphere extended only a maximum of 600 miles above the earth's surface? And they told us the farther out we went, the colder it got? Well, change the text books; scientists of the Rand Corporation, a non-profit organization of scientists, announce that the atmosphere extends 15,000 miles out, and from 400 miles out, there is a temperature of some 4,000 degrees Fahrenheit. Outer space, they say, is filled with hydrogen gas at 18,000 degrees Fahrenheit. We wonder if all textbooks aren't science fiction after all?

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SEVEN COME A-LOVIN'

by CRAIG BROWNING

The stasis field made it possible to travel for hundreds of years in space without dying of old age; but it also made it possible to live a fleeting life!

JUDSON LEHR shut off the automatic reader, took out the spool, and dropped it into the filing chute. He glanced at his watch. It was a little after twelve.

"Two hours," he muttered. "Two minutes outside the library. That means it's still only a little after ten. Wonder if I can coax Seven to scare me up something to eat."

He pressed a red button beside the mirror-perfect door. In a moment it opened. He stepped into a small room and pressed another red button.

The small room was nothing but mirrors. It seemed to grow slightly bigger during the next few seconds. Then another door opened. Jud stepped into the hall from the stasis lock—for that was what the small room was.

The stasis field, discovered in 1980, had become a part of everyday living. In the library time ran sixty times faster than in the hall. Without the stasis lock, anyone stepping into the library stasis field would have died quickly from the stress of two time-rates existing at once in the body.

Jud hurried down the hall past a dozen or more doors to the double door entrance of the salon. The plastidome ceiling revealed the sparkling blanket of stars, softened by filtering qualities of the plastic itself.

The salon was empty when he entered. Almost immediately Seven appeared from the kitchen, bowing Jud to a seat with grave formality.

"You're two hours early," Seven said. There was a shade of complaint in its tone.

"I was in the library," Jud explained. "Fix me up a snack to tide me over till lunch time."

"I'm afraid it can't be done, Mr. Lehr." Seven's voice had just the right shade of regret.

"Can't be done?" Jud echoed. "And why the 'Mr. Lehr'? Are you in one of your temperamental moods again, Seven?"

"My name is not 'Seven,' Mr. Lehr," Seven said frigidly.

"What is it then, Seven?" Jud grinned.

"Don't you know?" Seven said quickly, affecting surprise. "Why, it's Rosey, of course."

"Rosey? Rosey? Last time it was Myrtle."

"This is this time," Seven said patiently.

"Well, to me you're still Seven," Jud said.

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Seven handed Jud his soup . . . and winked very deliberately.

"Then I'm afraid you'll have to wait until lunch time," Seven murmured calmly.

"You know I could report you for this and have you scrapped, Seven," Jud said.

Seven shrugged its broad shoulders and sighed with affected bore-

dom.

"Sometimes I wish you would, Mr. Lehr. The life of a waiter is hardly worth living."

"Then you would consider that I was doing you a favor if I turned you in for insubordination?"

"Oh, no. Unfortunately, we late models have a little self-preservation instinct in our make-up."

"Not to change the subject," Jud said. "How about a little snack?"

"Sorry, sir," Seven said. "Now, I don't see any attraction in being scrapped, but it would be nice to be conditioned to some other task than waiting tables."

"A cheese sandwich and a glass of milk would be just about right to tide me over the next couple of hours," Jud persisted. "What other kind of work do you think you'd like?"

"Sorry. No food for you until lunch time. I've been thinking I would like to be a calculator. You know—solve problems for the scientists."

"I'll try to arrange it, Seven," Jud said. "Now, how about that sandwich?"

"Sorry." Seven did a double take and looked around. "I thought for a minute you were talking to me, but you couldn't have been. My name is Rosey."

"It's Seven."

"It's Rosey."

Jud and Seven glared at each other.

"I'm awfully hungry—Rosey."

"Oh, that's too bad. Would you like a cheese sandwich and a glass of milk, Jud? I'll get them for you right away."

The robot turned and hurried to the kitchen, its tall, athletic body moving gracefully. Jud watched it depart, an affectionate gleam in his eyes.

Soon the robot returned, balancing a tray expertly on the palm of one hand. Humming softly, it laid out the light snack, then straightened up. Jud took a bite out of the sandwich.

"So you would like to be a robot calculator," he muttered through the mouthful.

"Yes. I think so. It's a profession with a future to it."

Jud ate in silence for several minutes, apparently thinking it over.

"You know," he said. "I can't guarantee anything; but I can try. I'll miss you, though."

"Oh, but you can come to see me," Seven said quickly.

"Hm mm," Jud shook his head. "Calculators don't see anyone but the scientists who give them the problems to solve. You would always be working. They wouldn't let me interrupt your figures."

"You mean I wouldn't get to talk to anyone?" Seven asked.

"No, Rosey. No one. But that's what you want to get away from, isn't it? Meeting the public? Guys who want cheese sandwiches at ten o'clock in the morning?"

"Well, yes. But—"

"No buts about it," Jud said. "It hurts me to the quick that you don't like waiting on me. But I'll swallow my hurt and pull a few strings for you. It doesn't matter that I will come in and automati-

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cally look around for good old Seven—I mean Rosey, and have a stranger wait on me. I'll try to eat my food. I'll try to forget."

"I didn't know you felt that way, sir," Seven said. "I—I've changed my mind. I don't want to be a calculator. I'd rather stay where I'm wanted and where I can be of real service."

"But you're dissatisfied," Jud objected.

"Only at times," Seven said. "By the way, I saw Ethel and Fred go down the corridor a half hour or so ago. They seemed quite—chummy."

Jud set the glass of milk down with a bang and clenched his fists, then relaxed with an effort.

"Were they!" he said coldly.

"Yes," Seven said. "Just—like—that." He smiled maliciously at Jud. "They make a nice couple," he added.

Jud frowned at the robot.

"You've developed something new in a robot," he said. "Imagination. The ability to prevaricate."

"Oh, but it isn't new," Seven said hastily. "Robots have been able to prevaricate for a long time."

"So it's a lie," Jud said triumphantly.

"How is your cheese sandwich?" Seven said stiffly.

Jud chuckled. Seven remained stiff and uncomfortable a moment, then broke down and chuckled.

"You tricked me," he admitted.

"So I did," Jud said smoothly. "I wish it was as easy to get Fred out of the running. It seems every time I'm alone with Ethel he shows up, and when I'm working he's always with her."

"Perhaps she prefers him to you," Seven suggested.

"Nonsense!" Jud said. "Have you ever noticed the look in her eyes when she's near me?"

"They seemed a trifle bored," Seven said slowly.

"Nuts," Jud said disgustedly. "You're lying again."

"Would you like me to help you get rid of Fred?" Jud asked.

"You stay out of it," Jud said. "He'd know what you were up to. Why don't you help him? Then I'd be sure to win out."

He gulped the last of his glass of milk and stood up. Seven watched him leave. There was a thoughtful expression on the robot's face.

"Hi, Ethel," Jud said. His face was quite pink. His breathing was quick, like that of someone who has just run a few hundred yards.

"Hello, Jud," Ethel said, noting these signs and giving him a starry-eyed smile that further augmented them.

"Hungry?" he asked, surreptitiously taking her hand in his as they joined the crowd going into the salon for lunch.

"Mmm hmmm," Ethel hummed, fully aware of the tingling ecstasy that sound produced in Jud. She followed her remark with an intimate squeeze of his hand.

"How'd your work go today?" Jud asked in a valiant attempt to forestall complete delirium of his senses.

"Just fine with me helping her," a new voice joined the conversa-

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tion.

Anger took the blush of love that tinted Jud's face and turned it into a darker, fiery hue.

"Why don't you scram?" he said. "This is my lunch date with Ethel. I don't horn in when YOU have a date with her."

"That just shows I'm the more aggressive," Fred said calmly.

"Stop quarreling," Ethel ordered. "I can have lunch with both of you."

Seven glanced up from its work as the three entered the salon and noticed the frustrated anger on Jud's face, the amused triumph on Fred's, and the happy expression on Ethel's. It was impossible to tell whether her happiness was at being with Jud, or at being the center of attention of two rivals. Seven guessed it was a little of both.

It smiled to itself, and managed to be near Jud when the three reached their seats. Bending over, the robot whispered in Jud's ear:

"Your troubles will soon be over, Jud. I have a plan."

"Oh, no!" Jud groaned.

"What was that?" Ethel asked.

"Nothing," Jud said. "That is, I noticed we're having macaroni and cheese for lunch, and I had a cheese sandwich a couple of hours ago."

"Well, what's the matter with that?" Fred said. "I thought you lived on cheese and milk."

"How soon will it be before we pass close to Sargus III?" Ethel asked, adroitly changing the subject to something safer.

"Sometime this afternoon, ship time," Jud replied. "That's about three or four years, cosmic time."

"It always seems so marvelous to me," Ethel said. "That we can travel through space for years and years, and have it seem just a few months to us in the ship."

"It's a good thing we can," Jud said, more at ease on the safer conversational grounds. "Without the stasis field we couldn't live long enough to reach the nearest star, let alone travel half way across the galaxy. The time ratio on the ship is a thousand to one."

"One thing I can't understand," Ethel continued. "Why don't the stars look different? If we're slowed down to a thousandth of our normal time, it seems to me we would not be seeing the same wavelengths of light."

"Oh, but we are," Jud said. "You see, everything within the stasis field is slowed down equally. Even light. So it travels a hundred and eighty-six thousand miles a ship-second in the ship. In fact, that's how they first discovered the stasis field."

"What do you mean?" Ethel asked.

"Well, it was way back in 1984," Jud began. "The General Electric research department had just succeeded in generating a small stasis field, but didn't know what it was. In one of their tests they directed a beam of light through the space of the field, and another around it, joining them together again on the other side. Then they ran the combined beams into an interferometer. It was standard procedure. They had been doing that with

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all sorts of fields. But this time they discovered that by varying the new field they could slow light down as light to a few feet a second! No other field had any effect on the actual velocity of light.

"Also, they could speed light up to velocities much greater than its normal speed by reversing the field. Then they got to wondering what effect the new field had on matter. One of the technicians by the name of Peter Sorenson had an apple in his lunch with a small spot of rot in it. He placed the apple in the space of the new field, and turned it up in the reverse settings. He left it that way for an hour, and when he shut off the field the apple was completely rotten, as though it had aged months in that hour.

"Next he took a cage with a white rat in it, and did the same. In an hour when he shut off the field the rat was dead. It had died of thirst and starvation! Then he put in a pregnant white rat, a lot of food and water, and turned the field way up for fifteen minutes. When he shut it off there were ten full grown white rats, the original one, and most of the food and water were gone. The rats were all healthy, too, showing that the accelerated living had no harmful effects on them. From that beginning it wasn't long until they had the modern stasis machines."

Seven appeared with a tray and placed lunch in front of the three. Jud looked at the robot suspiciously. The robot looked back at him knowingly.

"Well," Ethel said, taking a dainty bite of macaroni and cheese. "Stasis is certainly wonderful. You can sleep eight hours in eight minutes if you want to, and all sorts of things."

"Of course it's really eight hours, physical time," Fred put in. "If you did it all the time you'd grow old faster than other people, because you'd be living faster while you sleep." He yawned widely.

"If you're so sleepy why don't you excuse yourself and take a nap?" Jud suggested hopefully.

"Funny," Fred said, yawning again. "Can't understand it. I had plenty of sleep."

"Why don't you go take another nap?" Jud suggested hopefully.

Fred stared at his plate for a long minute. Suddenly he seemed to snap out of it.

"Huh?" he said abruptly. "What did you say, Jud?"

"I said, why don't you go take a nap?" Jud repeated.

"Why should I?" Fred asked. "I'm not sleepy. Whatever gave you the idea I should take a nap?"

"You just said you were sleepy," Jud said.

"Oh," Fred said vaguely. "Perhaps I am. Yes. I think I am. I think I'll go take a nap."

He rose from the table and went toward the door. Jud watched him go, a puzzled frown on his face.

"You know, Ethel," he said. "I'd almost swear that Fred was under the influence of that new drug the psychologists are playing around with. You know, the one that puts yourself to sleep and leaves the rest of you fully awake—just like you

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were under hypnosis."

"He did act strange," Ethel said lightly. "But I'm glad he's gone, Jud. Aren't you?"

"Yes," Jud said, his frown deepening as he saw Seven go through the door after Fred. "Oh, sure."

"You don't sound like it," Ethel pouted. "Fred is always attentive to what I say. I don't think you even heard me."

"Huh?" Jud said absently. "Oh, I'm sorry, Ethel. My mind was on something else. What did you say?"

"What did I say?" Ethel echoed. "Well, I like that, Judson Lehr. *You're* the sleepyhead, not Fred."

"I'm not either," Jud said defensively. "It's just that—oh skip it. Anyway," he said, smiling at her. "For once Fred isn't around. We're alone."

"And I'm not sure I like it," Ethel said. "Without Fred here you're positively bored with me."

"No I'm not," Jud said.

His eyes sought the door again, worriedly.

"Will you excuse me, Ethel?" he asked, rising. "I have something important to do. That is, it isn't more important than being alone with you. Nothing is more important that that. But it has me worried."

He glanced miserably at her and fled.

An hour later he returned to the now empty salon. He had searched the whole ship without finding any trace of either Fred or Seven. They were either deliberately avoiding him or— He refused to think of the alternative.

"Seven wouldn't dare!" he thought to himself each time that alternative presented itself. "And what would be the sense in it?"

He knew what the sense in it would be. That knowledge made cold sweat break out on his forehead. But he refused to admit that it was possible. And even if it was, there would be no way of finding Fred and Seven until it was too late.

He sat down at an empty table among all the other empty tables in the deserted salon and rested his chin on the palm of his hand.

Five minutes later the door opened and Ethel came in. She looked at Jud suspiciously for a minute. He was quite unaware of her. A look of commiseration appeared on her face. She crossed over to Jud slowly.

"I'm sorry I was cross with you, Jud," she said.

"Huh?" Jud said, startled. He looked at her. "Oh. It's you."

"Yes, it's me," Ethel said angrily. "You said that like you don't want me around. I know that isn't so; but if your work occupies your mind *that* much, it's a good thing I'm finding it out now before it's too late."

"It's not my work," Jud said. "It's—well—it's something else."

"What?" Ethel demanded.

Jud stared at her blankly for a minute. "I can't tell you," he said.

"Another woman?" Ethel persisted.

"Woman?" Jud echoed blankly. "No. No woman. There's no woman in my life but you, Ethel."

The statement sounded hollow

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even to his own ears, so he wasn't surprised at the look of unbelief in Ethel's eyes. In search of something to divert her attention, he glanced up at the plastidome ceiling.

"Look!" he said. "There's Sargus III now!"

"Oh, isn't it beautiful!" Ethel exclaimed.

Sargus III covered a good fourth of the visible sky. Its mass was barely a hundred times that of the Sun about which the Earth circled; but it was a pint-size galaxy, a spiral nebula hardly more than a hundred million miles across, flat, with here and there a focus of incandescence brighter than the rest.

"See the planets forming?" Jud said, awed by the spectacle. "A few thousand years from now the process will be completed and the planets will be cooling slowly. A couple of million years from now one or two of the planets will be cool enough for us to land on safely."

"It's too bad we can't just stay here and watch," Ethel said dreamily. "But we're moving so fast we'll be gone in a few more hours."

"Ship time," Jud corrected her. "Actual time we're moving very slow. Barely a hundred miles a second."

"It's wonderful," Ethel whispered, her face lifted and her lips slightly parted.

Jud looked at her and swallowed loudly. He looked around to make sure no one was in the room, then swiftly kissed her.

"Jud!" Ethel said, startled. Then she smiled. Dropping her eyes demurely, she said, "I didn't *dream* you would dare, Judsy."

"Gee!" Jud said deliriously. "Then you aren't mad because I—kissed you?"

"Mad?" Ethel said. Her eyes hid an amused light. "I guess I should be," she said slowly. "But I just can't somehow be mad at—*you,* for doing—that."

"You called me Judsy," Jud said dreamily. He looked up through the plastidome at Sargus III. "I'll always remember Sargus III because it was in its light that I first kissed you, Ethel."

"Why that's poetic, Judsy," Ethel said. "I didn't know you were poetic. Will you write me a poem sometime, Judsy?"

"Sure, Ethel," Jud said modestly. A daring light appeared in his eyes. He kissed her again.

Captain Jessup frowned at the image of his pretty secretary in the screen. "Yes?" he demanded impatiently.

"Technician third class, Judson Lehr, insists on seeing you personally about something, Captain," she said.

"Tell him to see his immediate superior about it," the Captain said.

"I did, sir. He says it's something he can tell only to you."

"Tell?" Captain Jessup asked. "Hmm. Let him come in." There was an interested glint in his steel gray eyes as he shut off the intercom. He took out a cigar and bit off the end, then lit it thoughtfully. "Mutiny?" he voiced his thought in the empty room. He couldn't

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imagine what else a member of the crew would want to see him about.

The door opened. The pretty secretary closed the door behind Jud. Jud, alone with the captain of the space ship, found his courage wilting. He stared at the tall, cigar-chewing, gaudily-uniformed captain as one might stare at an angry bull pawing at the ground, preparing for the charge.

"Well, young man?" Captain Jessup demanded impatiently.

Jud gulped loudly. "I—I'm sorry I disturbed you, sir. It — it wasn't anything—I guess. I'll go now."

He turned and headed for the door.

"Stop," the captain said quietly. Jud froze in midstep. "Come back here," the captain said. Jud pivoted as if guided by puppet strings and turned to face the captain.

He felt the uncompromising glare of the steel gray eyes bore into him.

"It really wasn't anything," he said weakly. "Ethel loves me, I'm sure—now. But I can't find Fred."

"Who's Fred?" Jessup asked.

"Fred's the one I was afraid Ethel was in love with," Jud said, then added with an attempt at cheerfulness, "But she isn't. At least, she doesn't seem to be — now."

"Oh," Jessup said dryly, taking the cigar out of his mouth and inspecting its frayed end.

"You see, sir," Jud went on desperately. "I'm afraid Seven has done something."

"Who's Seven?" Jessup demanded with virtuous patience dripping from his voice.

"He's one of the waiters," Jud said. "It would be all right. That is, I wouldn't worry; but I'm afraid he'll get mixed up. You see, sir, Seven wanted to help me because I called him Rosey. Not very many people would do that for him. So, you see, if he's done anything it's really my fault."

"Look, son," Jessup said in a kindly tone. "This is a scientific survey ship."

"Yes, sir," Jud said.

"You were accepted as a crew member because you passed examinations that led us to believe you were rational—at least."

"Yes, sir," Jud gulped.

"I can't expect you to act completely adult yet," Jessup continued. "Your physical age is about nineteen in spite of the fact that you were born three hundred years ago. So I can't expect you to act as though you were thirty or forty years old physically. But—" Jessup jammed his cigar in his mouth and bit down on it, "I certainly have a right to expect you to be rational. Stop behaving like a stuttering infant and tell me in simple language what's on your mind."

"Yes, sir," Jud said weakly. "I suppose I have to—now that I've gone this far. You see, Fred was always around when I was with Ethel. I never had a chance to be alone with her. And Seven hinted that he was going to do something about it."

"Go on," Jessup said.

"Well," Jud hesitated. "I'm afraid he has. You see, at lunch today all of a sudden Fred acted

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like he had had a dose of that new hypnotic drug that just blanks out the self and leaves a person amenable to suggestion. Then he left the table and went to take a nap when I suggested he was sleepy."

"I see," Jessup said. "You gave him a hypnotic and suggested he go take a nap. Very ingenious."

"I didn't give him the drug," Jud said. "It must have been in his macaroni and cheese."

"I see," Jessup said patiently.

"So he got up and left without finishing his lunch," Jud continued. "Just because I suggested he should. And then Seven followed him out of the salon."

"And you think Seven put the drug in his food?" Jessup asked.

"That's what I think," Jud admitted. "And afterward, when I looked all over the ship, I couldn't find either one of them anywhere."

"And what do you conclude from that?" Jessup asked.

"Well," Jud said, hesitating. Then he went on, blurting out his suspicions in a rush of words. "That's been four hours ago. In the library that would be ten days. In free space it would be ten years."

Captain Jessup stared at Jud blankly for a full minute. Then he burst out laughing.

"You know," he gasped. "That would be just what a robot would do. It's simple, direct, and naive. But of course we have to stop it, son."

"How?" Jud asked.

The answer to that question seemed not so simple an hour later. Captain Jessup had called in the scientists to get their advice. He had briefly outlined what had happened.

"I *think* what we should do is quite simple," he concluded. "Obviously Seven and Fred Carter are in a private stasis field in which time is so speeded up relative to ship time that their space is too small to find. I think all we need do is speed up ship time until their private field is big enough to find, and then speed up ship time until it equals their time rate."

"It's a good thing you consulted us," one of the scientists said. "If you did that you would probably run into trouble. In the first place, unless Seven had forethought enough to tie his field to that of another private field such as that of the library, their field is probably somewhere in the rear of the ship now, having passed through the walls of the ship."

"Yes," another spoke up. "Seven probably used one of the self-powered portable units, and pushed it down to full time-rate. If so, the field is now a particle less than an eighth of an inch in diameter relative to the ship, and with all its original mass. The gravity-drag of the ship will have pushed it right through the ship plates. That is, unless Seven had sense enough to tie it to another private stasis field. In that case surface tension of the two fields would hold it in place."

"We'll have to do this very carefully," still a third said. "First of all we'll have to stop the ship so as to eliminate gravity-drag effects. Otherwise, when we weaken our

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ship-stasis, the private field may break loose into space—in which case we'd never find it."

"All right," Jessup said with finality. "It's your job to direct things."

Jud listened to this conversation with about the same feeling that one watches an approaching snow-slide, and the same feeling of helplessness. Surely, the least they would do with Seven would be to scrap it—and Seven was the most human robot he had ever known. And Fred— Jud trembled at the thought of Fred.

And what of himself? They were being nice to him now; but what about when this was all over? If something drastic happened to Fred he would be considered as much to blame as Seven. More so, since Seven had merely tried to fulfill his wishes. He had told Seven not to help him; but his attitude had been such that Seven had felt he should.

Worst of all, what would Ethel think? He hadn't dared to tell her what he feared had happened. She would find out inevitably when Seven and Fred were found. She would believe he had put Seven up to the whole thing.

Everybody would think that. Robots never did anything unless they felt it was a request of some human. They were built that way.

Jud hid these thoughts and worries behind an expressionless mask and listened to the scientists and the captain in subdued silence.

Finally it was agreed that the first thing to do was to conduct a thorough search of the ship in an attempt to locate Fred and Seven — or a small silver sphere that would be the stasis field Seven had built up.

Captain Jessup reached toward the intercom to start things going. He paused and looked over at Jud as if remembering him again.

"I think you'd better go to your quarters until this is straightened out, Mr. Lehr," he said gravely.

"Yes, sir," Jud said, and fled.

Sargus III had been slowly tilting and presenting a sharper and sharper edge in the viewscreen in Jud's compartment. Its deliberate motion began to alter. At first it became stationary. Then it seemed to recede into the distance and grow larger at the same time.

Jud viewed these signs of altering time-rate without emotion. He had reached the state of mind where any event at all is unwelcome because it promises nothing but trouble.

He lay on his bunk. Most of the time his eyes were closed. Occasionally he opened them and glanced at the viewscreen to see if there were any further changes.

Suddenly the door flew open. A voice cried out.

"Jud!" it exclaimed. "Jud, it's me—Seven!"

He opened his eyes. The robot was rushing toward him.

"Where have you been?" Jud said coldly, sitting up. Seven came to a halt, a hurt look on its face.

"Aren't you glad to see me, Jud?" the robot asked. "It's been fifteen years. I've been looking forward to this reunion all those years

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—and you treat me coldly."

"It hasn't been fifteen years," Jud said. "It's been all afternoon. And what did you do to Fred?"

"Oh, you should see him," Seven chuckled. "He's an old man now. Thirty-five years old. Ethel will never give him a tumble again. I kept him under that drug all these years. It acts like amnesia, so he thinks he's still nineteen, like you. But he's thirty-five!"

"Ohh," Jud groaned. "What are they going to do to you? What are they going to do to me? That's worse than — than *killing* someone!"

"Right now they're making tests on Fred," Seven said. "The scientists say I've made a major contribution to science in keeping a man under that drug for fifteen years. It proved the drug to be quite harmless. They can use it for curing insanity and all sorts of things. They want me to write a book on my experiences with Fred. I've cured him of being in love with Ethel. But what I started out to do was to make him so old she wouldn't have anything to do with him. That would leave the field to you."

"Yes," Jud groaned. "I figured that out right away. But fifteen years out of his life! He's ruined."

"I took educational spools with us," Seven said. "He's fully qualified to be a full fledged scientist."

"Where is he?" Jud asked.

He followed Seven. In the corridor they ran into Ethel.

"Oh, Judsy," she gushed. "I just heard about Fred. Isn't it wonderful? Where is he?"

"I'm going to see him now," Jud said. "Come along." He smiled in spite of his forebodings that things couldn't come out right. That was one thing for sure—Ethel wouldn't fall for an old man. Ethel's intimate hand squeeze reassured him on that point.

Following Seven, they came to the main lounge of the ship. Dozens of people were crowding in. Jud could see Fred over the heads of the others. There was no mistaking the fact that Fred looked much older.

"Yes," Fred's voice sounded above the murmur of voices. "I'm beginning to be aware of the passage of time. When I first awakened, though, I thought it was just moments ago that I lost consciousness in the salon while eating."

"Fred!" Ethel called excitedly, waving her arm. She disengaged her hand from Jud's and pushed forward through the crowd.

"Ethel!" he exclaimed.

Jud watched the two struggle toward each other with a sinking feeling. He heard Ethel's exclamation when she saw how much older Fred looked. Then—

"You look so *distinguished!*" Ethel squealed happily.

Jud turned and glared at Seven, who stood beside him, a look of stupefaction on his face. Seven shook its head in wonder.

"I can't understand it," the robot muttered. "I was so sure making him older would solve everything."

Jud turned his eyes toward Fred

(Concluded on page 156)

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The MIRACLE of ELMER WILDE

by ROG PHILLIPS

A gasp rose from the assembled scientists and generals as the atom bomb exploded — and twenty miles away, a second bright flash came.

If a man knows everything that will happen before it happens, does he have superhuman powers — or is he just a darn good guesser?

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THE seven old men crowded to the windows. Their eyes fixed on the driveway entering the parking lot spread out below. The young man remained seated at a place two-thirds of the way down the long table. His face was tense and deathly white, with a thin film of moisture giving it a waxy sheen.

A car disengaged itself from the heavy traffic, paused, then turned into the driveway. Seven pairs of eyes watching recognized the driver as a prominent senator. They blinked recognition, then squinted at the license plate. The number on the plate was A 504-327.

There was a mixture of expressions as the seven men turned away from the windows and resumed their seats. The young man looked at them briefly, interpreting their expressions. The film of perspiration evaporated, leaving his face dry.

A heavy silence hung in the room except for a frequent cough and the nervous scraping of a chair. The seven old men in their smart uniforms, each wearing the five stars that signified the highest position a man can hold in the armed forces, were broodingly frowning at the bare table top.

The young man waited.

"God!" a heavy voice exploded suddenly. "If it's true—!"

Silence fell again. The murmur of street noises drifted in. The man who had spoken turned his eyes on the young man and studied him as if he were some strange creature from another planet. The young man kept his eyes on his hands as they gripped each other nervously.

"What horse is going to win in the fifth—?" another voice began. It died out on a tone of tired futility. The same thought was in the minds of all seven generals. More proof would be just futile stalling.

The young man sensed this. His fingers stopped their twining. His hands came apart and relaxed. A faint smile appeared on his pale face.

"I'd better start things in motion," another voice said dully. "It will take at least twenty-four hours to get things ready." The owner of the voice shook his head sadly. "To think that I would ever act on the word of a—a fortune teller."

"We had all better get busy," another voice said quickly. "Each of us has his task to do, and it has to be done right down to the split second."

"Only the air operation has to be timed to the split second," the young man corrected. "The sea and land timing can be off three or four minutes either way without destroying the effects."

"He must be right," the man sitting at the head of the table said gravely. "The university conducting research in extrasensory perception gave him every test. He is the only person who ever had a perfect record on those tests. He even went further, and predicted the order of all fifty-two cards for ten consecutive shuffles, without an error. And that license number — We have evidence we can't possibly ignore that this young man knows the future far more exactly than most of us know our own immediate surroundings."

The lethargy of the seven men

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vanished as the door closed on the back of the young man. They turned now to watch another door, which opened even as they looked. Another young man stepped in.

"Come in. Come in, sir," the man at the head of the table invited impatiently. "What did you find?"

"You won't like it, sir," the newcomer said.

"Oh . . . Gentlemen, this is the young man I assigned to investigate that psychic," the general said. "Most of you know him, of course. Stanley P. Roit."

Stan shook hands with the general and nodded at the other six.

"You're in for a distinct shock, gentlemen," he said, placing the palms of his hands on the table and leaning on them. "The man who was just here is at this moment climbing into a sedan parked at the curb down below. Curled up in the back seat of that sedan is a full grown boa constrictor. Curled up in the front seat is a collie. Perched on the steering wheel and half asleep is a crow. And if that isn't bizarre enough, they are all three albinos."

Stan watched the expressions on the seven faces and hid a smile as he stood up again. He waited for the seven men to recover from the shock, much as a boxer waits for the punching bag to swing back before striking it again.

"Curled up in the back seat," he went on, "with her head asleep on the coils of the boa, is a little girl. She is undoubtedly Sharon Wilde, Elmer Wilde's daughter."

"His daughter?" a voice exploded. "I didn't think—that is—" The voice died in embarrassed confusion. Stan Roit smiled understandingly.

"You didn't think that a *god* would have a daughter," he said softly.

"Perhaps that's what I was thinking — unconsciously," came the uncomfortable admission.

* * *

"Keep trying," the man in blue serge said urgently. "We've got to get through to them. Tonight will be too late."

There was something peculiar about the man. It was something that touched the subconscious, but could not be pinned down.

The radio operator ignored the outburst and continued working at the telegraph key with sensitive fingers. There was something peculiar about the way the fingers moved as they manipulated the key.

Suddenly a burst of staccato signals sounded in the small room. The man in blue serge stopped his pacing and came up behind the man at the key.

The fingers were working the key again, rapidly. They paused as another staccato burst came from the loudspeaker.

"Too late," the man in blue serge groaned. His voice rose an octave as he vented his feelings in a tongue that would have been unknown to anyone on Earth.

"Too late is right," the radio operator agreed. "Elmer Wilde waited until the moment he knew the operations had been started. Do you suppose—?"

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"Nonsense!" the man in blue serge snorted. His eyelids drooped, discreetly masking the troubled, wondering look in his eyes. "Nevertheless, we must now take cognizance of the fact that nothing we do can remain unknown to him."

He paced around the small room again. As he walked he mumbled to himself in high-pitched tones. Suddenly he stopped.

"His daughter!" he exclaimed. "If we got hold of his daughter we could make him lay off."

"And of course he wouldn't know we were going to try it," the radio operator commented dryly.

"What we should do is turn around and go home to Amron I suppose?" the man in blue serge jeered. "Of course Ahjradl would understand when we explained that we turned tail because a god was against us."

The radio operator nodded bleakly.

"You're right," he admitted. "Going home is out of the question until we can announce the capture of the human race. If such is impossible, we must die trying."

"A third of us will be dead in twenty-four hours as it is," the man in blue serge said bitterly. "Our robot bombs aimed at Washington and the key power dams will be destroyed before they reach their mark. Our beachhead troops will be wiped out while they are still underwater."

"When will we — ah — kidnap Sharon Wilde?" the radio operator asked.

"Tomorrow," the man in blue serge answered. "Yes. Tomorrow. When Elmer Wilde's thoughts are occupied with the destruction of our invading forces, He will not be expecting anything like that until later."

"Unless he knows already we are going to try," the radio operator suggested.

"How can he?" the answer came quickly. "I just thought of the idea. Elmer Wilde can't know what I am going to think before I think it!" The man in blue serge stared angrily at the radio operator.

* * *

"Be careful of her, Anna," Elmer Wilde murmured, flashing the boa constrictor a warning look.

Anna was carefully wrapping herself about Sharon's sleeping form. Shortly the giant snake lifted the girl and glided out of the opened door of the sedan.

Anna followed Elmer through the door from the garage to the kitchen of the house, her dull-white body undulating with slow strength. Sharon, still asleep, lay in the loose folds of Anna's forepart, the blunt snakehead almost resting on the girl's chest.

The albino collie pushed the door of the car closed and waited until the tip of Anna's tail had cleared before entering the kitchen and closing the door to the garage.

The crow, its white feathers glistening under the kitchen lights, hopped up to the kitchen sink with the aid of a couple of swift wing beats and proceeded to quench its thirst.

Anna hissed an admonition to be quiet as she glided across the

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kitchen and up the stairs to Sharon's bedroom. Elmer was already there, getting small pajamas out of a drawer.

Anna laid Sharon on the bed and gently unwrapped herself from the child. She busied herself closing venetian blinds while Elmer undressed Sharon and slipped the pajamas on her.

Anna finished before Elmer did, and glided over to the bed, reaching up and laying her huge head just on the edge of the mattress. She lifted her head when Elmer pulled up the blankets to cover Sharon, then dropped it again, slowly.

Elmer looked down at her. The fear in the back of his eyes died down. His hands came out and rested briefly on Anna's thick neck. When he turned and left the room, closing the door softly behind him, Anna remained where she was, an immobile statue in dull white marble. Only her eyes were not white. They were a flaming red, even in the gloom of the darkened room.

As Elmer stepped into the hall there was a flutter of white wings.

"Be quiet, Luke," Elmer whispered as the crow landed on his shoulder.

"Be quiet," the crow said raucously. Then it clucked like a contented chicken as it settled down.

Smiling his amusement Elmer returned to the kitchen.

"Everything okay, Sheo?" he said inquiringly to the white collie.

Sheo interrupted his pacing to come over and stand up with his paws against Elmer's chest. He whimpered softly through his nose.

"They won't try tonight, Sheo," Elmer soothed him. "Let them spy all they want to. They won't try to take Sharon until twenty-three minutes after two in the afternoon tomorrow. Ignore their scent and get your sleep."

"Yes. Get your sleep, Sheo," Luke said, opening his eyes and coming to life briefly.

Sheo blinked owlishly at Luke, and yawned widely, then dropped to the floor and crossed to his bed, his toenails clicking on the asphalt tile.

Elmer crossed to the door to the front of the house, glanced affectionately at Sheo, flicked the toggle switch plunging the kitchen into darkness, and pushed into the living room.

He paused at a cage and lifted Luke off his shoulder, setting him gently inside.

On the wall to the left of the cage hung an oil painting of a man considerably older than Elmer but resembling him quite closely. Opposite it on the other wall was a similar portrait of a woman in her late forties. In the corner over the baby grand piano hung a third portrait, of a woman who bore a striking resemblance to Sharon Wilde.

Elmer crossed to the piano and sat down. There was a deep frown creasing his forehead as his fingers weaved fluidly over the keys . . .

* * *

The redheaded young lady was Stanley Roit's sister. She had followed Elmer's car—which was not

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hard to do since Elmer had driven slowly so as not to waken Sharon.

She didn't know about Anna, Luke, and Sheo. Stan hadn't told her. He had merely gone back to his own car, parked a quarter of a block behind Elmer Wilde's, and told her that if Elmer came out of the building and drove off, she was to follow him and report back to the office if anything unusual happened.

Her name was Adeline. She often vocally expressed the opinion that her father had named her that for the express purpose of being able to nickname her Ad Roit. If that were the case, then she had inherited a lot of her father's ability to see things through by searching for the funny side of them.

When Elmer drove his car into the garage, Adeline drove on down to the corner, made a U turn, and parked directly across the street from his house. The light in the upstairs front room went on just as she shut off the motor. The sun had been down for about twenty minutes. It was beginning to get dark.

A man came walking down the street. Adeline wasn't sure, but she had the feeling that he had gotten out of a car parked in the next block. He wore a blue serge suit. There was something peculiar about the way he walked.

She watched him as he turned in at Elmer Wilde's house and walked up onto the porch. It dawned on her what was so peculiar about his walk. The realization caused her to shake her head violently, as if that act could knock the idea loose. It wasn't something that could be accepted unemotionally. His legs didn't bend at the knee like ordinary people's. Instead, they bent uniformly into bows as he walked. It was barely noticeable through his loose blue serge trousers.

She watched him as he bent over the doorknob and did something — wondering at his connection with Elmer, since it seemed obvious he was about to insert a key in the door and walk in.

He stayed bent over for nearly five minutes at the lock. Meanwhile the light upstairs went out. A couple of minutes later the front of the downstairs lit up. Adeline saw Elmer sit down at the piano and heard him playing.

The man in blue serge straightened up then, and left the porch. Adeline studied his walk to make sure her original impression had been correct. Then she flicked on the two-way car radio. Her brother answered from the office.

"Listen carefully, Stan," she said into the microphone, holding it close to her lips and speaking low. "A man in blue serge just spent five minutes monkeying at the front door lock. He is now getting into his car, parked in the next block. And this sounds crazy, but it's the gospel truth: the way he walks his legs are multi-jointed like a snake's belly, rather than having knee hinges like ordinary folks. Otherwise he seems human."

"Good work, Ad," Stan's voice came over the speaker. "Now listen carefully. Keep the transmitter

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open, and keep saying where you are and what direction you're going. Follow his car. I'll join you as quickly as I can in my own. But for God's sakes run like hell if he starts after you, because I have more reasons than his legs to suspect he isn't a human being at all!"

"Okay, Stan," Adeline answered nervously. She laid the microphone on the seat beside her and started the motor. Mentally she gave her brother two minutes to get down to his car from the office and get his two-way radio warmed up.

Stan Roit made it to his car in less than the two minutes. He left a wake of dazed, protesting people and an angry elevator operator.

His fingers trembled as he switched on the two-way radio and started the motor. He had assigned his sister a task which he had thought would be perfectly safe—checking up on the movements of Elmer Wilde. Now, it seemed, she was following something that was dangerous—far, far too dangerous.

He let out a groan of relief as her voice sounded over the warmed-up radio.

"Heading south on sixty-fourth from Elmer's," she said. "Blue Serge is driving about thirty miles an hour. He may be heading for the arterial. Baker Boulevard isn't far now. His car is a slightly beat-up fifty-two Ford. License: A 503-826. Black sedan. I'm staying about a block behind him."

Stan cut out into traffic and wove his way in the general direction of Baker Boulevard.

"Blue Serge turned east on Baker Boulevard, heading toward town," Adeline's voice sounded again. "He has a start on me now, because I had to wait for cross traffic. Darn! Everybody ahead of me is stopping! All three lanes are blocked."

Stan frowned. He turned into Baker Boulevard with singing tires and headed west. Disregarding speed limits he cut in and out on the three lanes. It was five miles to where Adeline was. He made it in four minutes and seven seconds.

The cause of the tieup was easy to determine. Several red faced motorists were waving gleaming, metal triangles in the air and shouting at one another.

It seemed that some vandal had dropped a lot of small metal devices on the boulevard that were expressly designed to cut into tires and ruin them. They were triangular in shape, and with knife edges on both sides, so that whichever way they fell they would cut in about two inches.

Stan turned his car into the other lane and headed back toward town in a vain hope of catching up with Blue Serge. He spoke briefly into his radio, telling Adeline what had happened. She did not answer, so he presumed she was out of the car investigating.

Fifteen minutes later he gave up the search. It was obvious that Blue Serge had gotten away. Undoubtedly he had seen Adeline following him, and had waited until the right moment to drop his fiendish triangles.

"Stan?" the radio erupted suddenly.

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"Yes, Ad," he answered. "I took up the chase where you left off, but I couldn't find him."

"I got one of those things," she said. "I thought you might want to see it."

"I do," he answered. "I'll meet you at the office as soon as you can get there."

* * *

Sharon opened her eyes and watched Anna pull on the ropes that opened the venetian blinds, letting the morning sun stream in. Anna looked as much the prim housewife gliding from one window to another as any albino boa constrictor could possibly look—which is more than one might imagine.

"Good morning, Anna," Sharon said sleepily through a yawn.

Anna turned her red eyes and expressionless, blunt nose in the direction of the sound and paused, then went on with her morning task.

"Yes, it *is* a sunny day," Sharon said. She studied her small hands, frowning deeply. "You know, Anna, I'm worried about Daddy. He is afraid of something—and when Daddy is afraid of something it has to be pretty awful. Are you afraid of it too?"

She waited a while then added rather vehemently, "I wish you wouldn't be so superior. I have a right to know about it. He's my father."

She frowned at the covers. Then she shoved them back and slid over to the edge of the bed and sat up. Anna glided over and touched her pajama-clad knee softly with blunt nose. The thick neck behind the huge snake head was as large around as Sharon's slim waist, almost. The sixteen feet of thick body that trailed across the floor was living marble, able to crush every bone in a full-grown horse.

Sharon reached out her arms. Anna arched her neck so that the eight-year-old girl could put her arms around her. The waxy, monstrous head, that could unhinge its jaws to encompass the body of a sheep, rested motionless against the tousled head of the little girl until the small arms loosened their embrace and came away.

"Sharon!" It was Elmer Wilde calling from downstairs.

"I'm up, Daddy," Sharon called back. She ran to the door, leaping expertly over Anna's sprawled-out body.

"Be sure and brush your teeth," Elmer admonished from the foot of the stairs.

In the bedroom Anna's blunt nose was exploring the pillow where Sharon's head had lain. The huge snake was careful not to let her body touch any part of the bedding.

There was no way to tell what thoughts lay behind the two flaming red eyes in the immense head. The exploration of the pillow seemed satisfactory to Anna, however, for shortly she glided from the room, along the hall, and down the back stairway to the kitchen. She ignored the sounds of splashing water coming from the open door of the bathroom.

In the kitchen she glided over to where Elmer was busy at the

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electric range and laid her head at his feet for a moment in a gesture strangely suggestive of an obeisance. After that she glided over to a corner of the kitchen and pushed open a small door hinged at the top, and her long bulk slowly vanished into the outdoors.

"Good morning, Anna. Good morning Anna," Luke, the albino crow squawked belatedly as the tip of her tail vanished and the small door dropped back into place.

Sheo, busy eating his breakfast under the sink, paused to glance disgustedly at Luke, then resumed his eating.

Elmer flipped the skillet. Two frying eggs neatly turned over. The toaster flipped up. He went over to the table and buttered the two slices of toast, cut them in two, and laid them on a small plate in the center of the table.

Clumping footsteps sounded on the stairs. Sharon appeared, dressed, but with the back of her dress unbuttoned. Obediently she went over and let her father button her up. Sheo abandoned his breakfast long enough to go over and receive an affectionate pat on the head.

"Good morning, Sharon. Good morning Sharon," Luke squawked in unquenchable good humor.

"Good morning, Luke," she answered his greeting. Then she reached up and put her arms around Elmer's neck, kissing him on the cheek.

Crossing to the window she looked out and saw Anna stretched out on the back lawn, absorbing the sun's rays. The high brick wall that enclosed the back lawn was covered with ivy. There were small evergreens planted near the wall.

"Anna is sunning herself again, Daddy," Sharon said conversationally as she turned and took her chair at the table. "Do you suppose she misses Africa? She never says so, but sometimes I think she does."

"What does she say?" Elmer asked, smiling at the eggs as he slid them from the skillet to a plate.

"Oh," Sharon said. "She says it's a sunny day. She says she loves me. But when I ask her questions she just shuts up."

"I see," Elmer said. "She's a good mother to you, though, isn't she?"

"Yes," Sharon said. "I love her almost as much as if she were my mother—better than that fussy old nurse I used to have when we came over on the boat and Anna had to be kept in a crate. But I wish she would confide in me more."

"How does she talk to you?" Elmer asked.

"You've asked me that *so* many times, Daddy," Sharon complained tolerantly. "I ask her something out loud and the answer just comes into my mind, and I know it's from her." She bit into her toast and chewed thoughtfully for a minute. "Sometimes you do that too," she added gravely.

"You never said *that* before," Elmer said, his eyes serious.

"I've thought it, though," Sharon replied.

Luke landed on the table with a storm of wings and began clucking

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like a hen. Sharon broke off a piece of toast and held it in the fingers of her left hand for him to peck at, while she continued eating, using her right hand.

"Like what you're afraid of," Sharon spoke up suddenly. "Your thoughts come into my mind and I know that there is some awful thing somewhere that you are afraid of. But I don't know what it is." Her eyes pleaded.

"You wouldn't understand," Elmer said gravely. "Oh no! I'm not just saying that because you're a little girl, and to put off telling you. It's because — well, because you don't know enough yet. You have to study for years and years, and you will be grown up before you know enough so I could make you understand what I am afraid of."

"Then I'll just have to wait?" Sharon asked.

"Yes, Sharon," Elmer said firmly. "You'll just have to wait. It won't seem very long though. Just forget about it, and in no time at all you'll be a woman, and will know all the things you need to know before I can tell you about it."

"All right, Daddy," Sharon said. "I'll wait. But I can't stop wondering about it, can I?"

There was a long silence while they ate. Luke gravely clucked and pecked at the piece of toast Sharon had given him.

"How do you know that what comes into your mind is from Anna—or me?" Elmer asked suddenly.

"I just know," Sharon said, looking at her father with round eyes. "Like I know that you just said something. I *know* it."

A scene rose in Elmer's mind. It was a hidden valley in central Africa where he had been born. It was the home of Anna and a whole race of albino pythons—and pythons were supposed to exist only in South America. He could almost remember his father asking him the same question he had just asked Sharon. "How do you know?" and his answering, "I just *know*."

Anna had been *his* nurse, too. Behind her inscrutable face, deep in her flame-red eyes, lay an intelligence far older and far keener than Man could comprehend.

He could remember his early childhood — the strange, deeply-carved inscriptions on the stone walls of the room he had had for his own—and the flawlessly perfect python carved in white marble.

Elmer ate his breakfast in silence, immersed in these memories. He smiled to himself as he remembered that there was a time when he was convinced that Man was an inferior species, and Python was the superior being.

He had been born and had lived within the walls of a rambling temple whose least inscription defied deciphering by the accepted interpretations of ancient symbols. His father had devoted a lifetime to them, while his mother and Anna had raised him.

His thoughts shied away from the memory of his wife, and the two short years of marriage. He had known she would die. He had

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known—and yet he had kept it from her.

He knew so many things. They were a maelstrom of thought that rose in his mind and numbed emotion. He knew the meanings of the symbols that his father had spent so many years trying to unfathom. He knew the story of Djellab and its hidden valley, and how the Oracle of Delphi had gained its wisdom. He had read the lost history of the human race inscribed on walls that were built when the land upon which the Sphinx rests was lush valley, unseen by human eye.

Yet underneath this knowledge was another knowledge upon which it rested. It was a knowledge of something so utterly fantastic as to be beyond credibility—so incredible that the belief he knew some people gained on contact with him, that he was a god, wrong though that was, was commonplace and sensible.

Anna knew that secret. She knew the fear that was in him. The fear that rose up and made him want to scream, "No. No! I don't know anything! I refuse to know. I refuse even to think!"

She knew the agony he had suffered as his wife lay in his arms, dreaming of the child that would be theirs, and he dreamed with her, driving out of his mind the knowledge that she would die when that child came.

She knew the agony he had suffered in silence at the knowledge that his father and mother would be killed by the falling wall of the temple, as they had been. She had known too. And she had held him imprisoned in her coils to prevent him from warning them—saving them.

In the days after, alone in the hidden valley except for the infant Sharon, Anna and her snake people, Luke, and Shëo, he had come dimly to understand why she had held him while his parents went to their death — when he could have saved them.

He understood now. That understanding was bitter. It was an understanding of things no man should know. It was a knowledge that gods gain, in time, and in gaining cease to be gods.

It was strong in him now, churning in his thoughts, tearing at his body. He rose suddenly from the table, his chair falling over, and stumbled to the sink.

His breakfast came up, leaving his mouth sour. His eyes blinded with tears as the horrible fear cramped his stomach muscles into knots.

Sharon rose from the table and followed him, putting her arms around his legs, and trying to comfort him.

"Poor Daddy," she said comfortingly. "Luke, run and get Anna. Daddy's sick again."

"Anna! Anna!" the albino crow screamed raucously. It flew to the window overlooking the back lawn and pecked against the glass with its beak. "Anna! Anna!"

The huge snake, dozing in the sun, came suddenly to life, gliding swiftly to the corner of the house where the small door was. Its bright red, motionless eyes took in

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the situation as its long body was running into the kitchen.

Rising up, bracing her body against the sink, Anna weaved her head back and forth in slow rhythm, hissing softly. Her eyes seemed to glow as they caught and held Elmer's.

He relaxed. Slowly the fear left his eyes. Anna's head rose higher and higher until it was even with his.

"Anna says for you to take some soda, Daddy," Sharon said firmly.

"All right," Elmer said with a laugh. The light in Anna's eyes dimmed. The spell was broken.

"Soda! Take some soda!" Luke screamed. He flew from the window back to the table and started clucking over the piece of toast again.

* * *

"I have an idea, Stan," Adeline said as she poured her brother another cup of coffee.

"Uh?" Stan grunted, not looking up from the morning paper.

"I said I have an idea," Adeline repeated firmly.

"All right," Stanley Roit sighed, laying the paper aside. "What is it?"

"Suppose we get me in on the inside," Adeline said, her eyes serious. "What I mean is—let's go out to Elmer's place and tell him about the man in blue serge that monkeyed with the lock to his front door, and talk him into letting me stay out there and take care of his daughter for awhile."

"Maybe that boa constrictor might object," Stan said with a dry grin as he put sugar and cream in his coffee. "The way that little girl was resting her head on the snake while she slept in the car, I imagine the boa fancies itself a sort of snake mother."

"I'll make them put the snake back in its crate," Adeline said.

"And anyway," Stan said, ignoring his sister's remark. "If Elmer Wilde is a god, he won't need a nursemaid for his daughter—or do you have ideas about becoming the che-ild's step mother?"

Stan looked at his sister with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes. It vanished abruptly as he saw that she was deadly serious.

"Sorry, Ad," he said. "Give me half an hour to think about it. It may be a good idea after all."

Adeline ate at her breakfast, a troubled look on her face. Stan peeked at her from his newspaper occasionally.

"You know," Adeline said after a long silence. "I don't think Elmer Wilde is a god. The idea of a god being a man is no good. I admit there's something — but if he were a god he wouldn't have to sell an idea to the military would he? He could just wave his hand or something and do everything himself. And I think there's danger —terrible danger. That fellow in the blue serge suit wasn't human. I'm sure of that. And I think he was just getting an impression of the lock on that door so he could come back later. Maybe he plans on kidnaping the little girl so he can force Elmer Wilde to keep his mouth shut—or something."

"I think it might be a good idea for you to get in, at that," Stan

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said, laying down his paper. "We don't know too much about Wilde. He came to America from Africa six months ago with his daughter, Sharon, an albino crow he calls Luke, a white collie he calls Sheo, and an albino snake he kept in a crate in his stateroom. The records show he was born in Africa near a town called Djellab near the Sudan border in Equatorial Africa, and that his father was a missionary explorer who had moved around Africa for several years before settling down in the one spot where he remained until his death.

"Elmer met his wife at Cairo. She was the daughter of an American manufacturer. He took her to Djellab with him, and two years later she died in childbirth when the daughter, Sharon, was born. And a year later the senior Wilde and his wife were both killed when a wall of an old temple or something fell on them. Elmer continued to live there. That all happened seven or eight years ago. Now Elmer suddenly comes to America and starts spouting split-second prophecy about some strange invasion from he won't tell where, by he won't tell what. He backs it up by first going to Duke University and going through their ESP tests and creating a sensation. Yet, nobody has ever got close enough to him to find out anything about his human qualities. It might be a good idea for someone to do that, if he'll let them."

"Let's go then," Adeline said quickly. "Just as soon as I do up the dishes and get dressed."

"Okay, but hurry it up," Stan agreed. He glanced worriedly at his wristwatch.

* * *

"Pay attention, Sharon," Elmer admonished patiently. "You have to learn your lessons. If you don't, the authorities will make you go to school and learn them, and then they'll take Anna away from you."

"All right, Daddy," Sharon said. "But I'd *much* rather play with my doll, Nancy."

"Now then," Elmer said, "nine and seven are what?"

"Sixteen," Sharon answered.

"And three?"

"Nineteen."

"All right," Elmer said. "You write down the nine and add the one to the numbers in the next column."

The door chimes rang musically. Elmer frowned at them and laid the pencil down.

"Stay here," he ordered.

Pushing open the door from the kitchen to the front of the house he went to the front door. He opened it.

His eyes widened as they settled on the face of the red-headed young lady standing beside the man on the porch.

"My name is Stanley Roit," the man said, exposing an official looking badge fastened in a wallet. "This is my sister, Adeline. May we come in?"

"No!" Elmer said emphatically, starting to close the door.

"Yes, Daddy," a voice said behind him. "Anna says she is to come in."

The hostility died very slowly in

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Elmer's eyes as he stood in indecision. An inner struggle seemed to be going on.

"Very well," he finally said, stepping back.

Adeline hesitated, looking past Elmer fearfully. With a smothered smile Stan took her arm and walked through the doorway.

Inside everything seemed perfectly normal. There were three oil portraits hanging on the walls, a nice carpet, and a baby grand piano in one corner. There was no sign of the snake.

"Won't you sit down?" Elmer asked politely, pointing toward a davenport under the portrait of the elder Mr. Wilde.

"I can stay only a minute," Stan said, sitting down beside Adeline. "I'll come straight to the point, if you don't mind."

"Please do," Elmer said stiffly, frowning at Sharon who was bashfully flirting with Adeline.

"Come here," Adeline said, holding out her arms. Sharon ran to her and let herself be picked up and planted on Adeline's lap, while Elmer looked on disapprovingly.

"I'm connected with the government—" Stan began.

"I know," Elmer interrupted. "And I know about the man in blue serge. I also know the purpose of your visit — though I hadn't suspected it would be made until the doorbell rang," he added reluctantly.

"Is there anything you don't know?" Stan asked quizzically.

"Is Anna your mother, Sharon?" Adeline asked innocently, glancing slyly at Elmer, who began to turn red.

"Goodness no!" Sharon said, her tone very grownup. "She's my nurse. She couldn't be my mother because she isn't human, you know. But she's nicer than humans —except Daddy, and maybe you."

"Would you like for me to stay with you for a while?" Adeline asked Sharon. The little girl caught her breath.

"Oh, I'd love that," she said. "But Daddy doesn't want you to because if you do you will get hurt."

"I didn't say that," Elmer said harshly. "I think you'd better go into the kitchen, Sharon," he added firmly.

"She's going to stay right here," Adeline said. Her eyes locked with Elmer's.

Elmer glared at her. Finally his face softened.

"All right," he said, turning away and going over to the piano where he stood with his back to them. "I'll tell you something. I don't want you around. It's bad enough without that. It — sometimes it's too awful to bear. There are things I could tell you—but not with Sharon around. But can you imagine how terrible it must be—is—to have someone around and know they are going to get hurt at such-and-such a time—die at some certain time—and smile and live with them as if it weren't going to happen—and never dare tell them?"

"You knew?" Adeline said. Stan looked at her in surprise as he heard the softness in her voice.

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"You knew Sharon's mother was going to die?"

The back of Elmer's head nodded silently.

"Sharon!" a hoarse voice sounded from the kitchen.

"That's Luke," Sharon whispered. "I'll go get him. That's his cage over there, but he only stays in it at night."

She struggled off of Adeline's lap and went into the kitchen. Adeline and Stan watched as the kitchen door swung open. They had a brief glimpse of a dull white head of a monster snake—a profile view showing one large red eye. The door swung closed. Adeline's hands reached over and gripped her brother's for security. She found herself holding her breath and let it out with a slow sigh.

A moment later when the little girl returned with the white bird perched precariously on her wrist the snake was gone from view.

"So this is Luke!" Adeline said with exaggerated interest.

"Hello Luke. Hello Luke," the albino crow said hoarsely, using its wings to retain its balance on Sharon's wrist.

Stan chuckled and darted an uncomfortable glance at Elmer's back.

"Oh," Adeline exclaimed. "Will he come to me, Sharon?"

"Why, of course," Sharon said, giving her arm a toss that sent Luke fluttering into the air. He landed on the back of the davenport and walked with half-sidewise caution toward Adeline.

"He likes to have his neck scratched," Sharon volunteered.

"Quaawwwk," Luke said, imitating a chicken and lowering his head.

Adeline reached out slowly and rumpled the white feathers on the crow's neck. He submitted for a few seconds, then backed away and leaped into the air, flying across to a perch on his cage.

"Hello Luke. Hello Luke," he said.

Adeline turned her eyes on Elmer's back. They softened with a light that Stan had never seen in them before.

"You see, Mr. Wilde?" she said after a long silence. "You're overruled."

Elmer's shoulders sagged perceptibly. He turned slowly, a wry smile on his face.

"It looks that way, doesn't it?" he said.

Stan stood up, glancing anxiously at his wristwatch.

"I'll have to be going now," he said. Then half jokingly, "What time should I send the ambulance for my sister, Mr. Wilde?"

"A little before two-thirty this afternoon," Elmer replied seriously. "But I don't think she'll have to go to the hospital."

* * *

The seven generals, the President, and a half-dozen other high officials watched the television intently. From the view it was obvious that the television eye was pointed straight up, wherever it was. There were filmy white clouds moving slowly across the screen.

A sigh of relief sounded from a half-dozen throats as the clouds cleared away, leaving only the sky.

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An occasional eye glanced swiftly at a wrist to see the time, then returned to the television screen.

In one corner of the room a teletyper was busily clattering; but no one paid any attention to it. The time was very close when the guided missile with its atomic warhead would explode far up in the stratosphere—directly in the center of the screen, if everything went all right.

There should be other things visible at that instant if Elmer Wilde's predictions were correct. It was those things that this select group were anxiously waiting to see.

To each man in this group, personally, seeing those things would mean far more than the mere salvation of the human race — the warding off of an attack by some alien aggressor. Unconsciously each man had tied in this prophecied event with his beliefs and hopes and religion.

Each had told himself consciously and emphatically that it wasn't so—yet underlying the thin veneer of education and civilization lay an ancestral yearning for a concrete evidence of a Supreme Power and Infinite Wisdom—and each, against his better sense, felt that maybe, just maybe, the white-faced young man that so quietly said this and that is going to happen was a god.

Not a one of them would admit such a thought, and each had half humorously accused the others of entertaining it. Yet man remains a child even in old age, and yearns for Something. So the child and the man peered through the eyes of each of the men, while the second hand on the wall clock crept unconcernedly toward the fatal instant.

It had already been nearly five minutes since the rocket bomb had left White Sands, New Mexico. It was ploughing upward to a point roughly two hundred miles above the Earth's surface and eight hundred miles north of White Sands.

It was the very latest design in guided missiles, able to go halfway around the Earth and land on a dime at a predetermined split second. The atomic warhead was capable of utterly destroying anything within a radius of fifty miles. The greater part of its weight was a laminated steel case that by actual test would withstand two million pounds of pressure to the square inch before rupturing. That case, for a small part of a second, would hold in the fury of unleashed atoms, and multiply the power by restraining flying neutrons until nearly fifteen percent of the fissionable material had split.

The wall clock said seven seconds before two twenty-two as the flash appeared. There was a brief view of a long dark line off to one side that immediately became a second, and larger flash.

The second hand touched twelve as the two flashes combined and became lost behind a boiling, seething cloud of white vapor with evilly black and red depths.

"He was right!" Several voices spoke in unison.

"There was no mistaking it,"

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the President said tensely. "That was unmistakably a second rocket off to one side—about twenty or so miles, wasn't it?"

"I would say nearer ten," one of the generals said.

"And a tenth of a second either way would have meant missing it," another added, his voice hysterical with inner emotion.

Deep silence hung in the air for a second. Then, stumbling over one another, the men headed for the teletyper to get the news on the other two points of attack.

* * *

Stanley Roit had intended being present with the generals to watch the explosion in the stratosphere over television. He gave up his plan reluctantly as he went down the steps from Elmer Wilde's house to his car.

He had not missed the implications of Elmer's serious assertion that Adeline would be hurt "a little before two-thirty this afternoon."

In his mind he was unconsciously accepting Elmer's omniscience as he accepted the weather. It didn't occur to him to discount the possibility, or pooh-pooh it.

Instead, he coupled it with the mysterious man in blue serge, who was not a human being. He came up with the conclusion that Elmer knew that man and whoever was with him would try something a little before two-thirty.

As he drove toward the downtown area he thought over plans. And after he reached his office he spent considerable time on the telephone.

Thus it was that shortly before two o'clock there were an unusual number of police cars cruising in the vicinity of Sixty-fourth and Pine. In addition there were several cars with no distinguishing features except the double antenna that denoted a two-way radio. Inside each of these cars were curious-eyed men whose eyes flicked briefly over each car that passed, and its occupants.

Stan, cruising the neighborhood, relaxed. "Certainly," he thought, "Blue Serge will note all this and realize how impossible it will be to do anything and get away with it." He glanced at his watch. It was twenty minutes after two.

He passed the parked ambulance as he crossed Sixty-third, heading toward Elmer Wilde's house. There was no sound from the radio. No suspicious car had been seen within a half-mile of the place.

He glanced at his watch again as he turned into Sixty-fourth. It was twenty-two minutes after two. Elmer's house was three blocks down the street.

He debated whether he should drive down and park in front of it. There was already a car full of federal agents parked in that block.

He glanced nervously at his watch again. Twenty-three minutes after two. The atom bomb would already have exploded far up in the stratosphere above the Colorado-Wyoming border.

The staccato sound of shots came suddenly from ahead. Cursing under his breath, Stan pushed the

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throttle to the floor. In less than a minute he covered the two and a half blocks and was screeching to a stop.

Men were erupting from the car parked there. They were running toward Elmer's house across the street. As Stan opened the door of his car and jumped out, tugging at his own gun in its shoulder holster, his eyes were surveying the scene.

The house seemed innocently peaceful. The front door was wide open, but there was no movement outside, and the gloom of the interior was motionless.

There had been *something*. Otherwise there would have been no shooting. Stan was not pausing to answer questions, however. His gun was out and he was running up the walk to the porch after the two federal men ahead of him.

He reached the steps as they did. They slowed cautiously and he darted ahead of them.

As he leaped through the open door he had a brief glimpse of a man lying on the floor, his body strangely twisted. The door of the kitchen was swinging to a quick stop, indicating that someone or something had just passed through.

The sound of a back door slamming came to him when he was half-way across the room. He reached the kitchen door and shoved it open, leaping through.

Several things met his eyes. Adeline was lying on the floor, a numbed expression on her face. Elmer was stretched out near the back door on his face, one arm moving in slow motion. And a long, dull-white, tapered rope was being pulled through a small opening in the corner near the door. Stan's mind just had time to comprehend that the rope was Anna's body when Adeline shouted:

"Sharon! Out the back door. Blue Serge got her."

Stan jumped over Elmer's outstretched body. The little door near the floor swung down and in as he reached the back door. He twisted the knob, opened the door, and darted through.

He brought up with a painful thud against the side of a car. His eyes blinked in the gloom of the garage. Shaking his head to clear the pain, he looked about, searching for a way out.

Then lights exploded inside his brain.

* * *

"We thought they were salesmen and didn't want to draw attention to ourselves," a voice was saying. "We didn't suspect they weren't until we saw them unlock the door and start in."

Stan opened his eyes. He was lying on the kitchen floor, totally ignored. The man who was talking was standing at his feet with his back turned. He was using his hands to emphasize his remarks.

"They stopped at every house," he went on. "It never occured to us that the characters we were after would be lugging a vacuum cleaner and ringing doorbells."

Stan raised his head a little, fighting the nausea. Adeline was sitting at the kitchen table. A doc-

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tor was on his knees wrapping a wide strip of gauze around her arm.

Elmer had been dragged over to one side against the sink cabinets. A man was on his knees examining the back of Elmer's head.

It irked Stan that no one was paying any attention to him. Then a wave of self condemnation overwhelmed him. He had muffed things!

Suddenly something blurred his vision. Something wet landed on his face and swept over his eyes and nose, shutting off his breath. He struck out in panic and struggled up.

It was the white collie, apologetically friendly. Stan grinned nervously.

"Hey! Look who's here!" a male voice growled in sympathetic welcome. Hands lifted Stan to his feet. Anxious faces looked at him.

"Sharon?" Stan asked, shaking his head again to clear his mind.

"Not yet," one of the men answered. "He can't get away with her, though. The entire neighborhood is covered. He's hiding someplace."

"Are you all right, Adeline?" Stan asked, going over to her unsteadily, still shaking his head.

"Just a flesh wound," Adeline said. "And so help me I think it was a bullet from the gun of one of your friends here."

"Uh uh," one of them said. "But come in the front room, Stan. I want you to see something."

Stan glanced down at the still unconscious Elmer, then followed the federal man into the front room. There were more men there, their attention centered on the strangely distorted body on the floor that he had glimpsed when he dashed through before.

Clothes had been stripped away from the dead man's chest and shoulders. With an exclamation Stan kneeled down.

There were broad, blue welts on the man's skin. He guessed immediately what had caused them. Anna had crushed the life out of the fellow. But there was something more startling than that. It was the texture of the skin itself. Where it was blue from being crushed the strangeness of the skin was more noticeable.

The skin was covered with minute, geometrically placed scales, dainty in texture.

"Look," the federal man said, lifting an arm of the dead man. "Every bone in his body crushed." The arm curved loosely like a slack rope.

"Maybe," Stan said grimly. "And maybe not. An X-ray may show that his arms and legs are segmented like a—a snake's."

"Now say!" an old man who had been hovering by the body spoke up, startled. "That may be right. I noticed the skin right away. And I wondered how a snake could crush bones into such short lengths that an arm would hang like a rope."

"Place a heavy guard over this corpse," Stan said, rising to his feet. "He's the only concrete piece of evidence we have right now that the things Elmer says are true."

As Stan entered the kitchen

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again he saw that Elmer Wilde was stirring. He went over to his sister, who was sitting alone now, a forlorn look on her face. Without speaking, he cupped his fingers at the nape of her neck and kneaded it affectionately in a gesture he had always used.

She reached up and patted his hand, smiling at him with lips that trembled.

"He's coming around now," the doctor said unnecessarily, as Elmer opened his eyes.

With a groan Elmer turned over on his back. The doctor helped him rise to a sitting position.

His face expressionless, he surveyed the room. His eyes softened as they rested briefly on Adeline, but became bleak when they saw the bandage on her arm.

Sheo was grovelling on his belly a few feet in front of Elmer, whining softly in a varying way that almost seemed to be speech.

"Where are they hiding with her?" Stan asked abruptly.

Elmer's eyes jerked to Stan's at the sound of his voice. He didn't answer.

"Good God, man!" Stan said. "Stop this nonsense. These are federal agents. The neighborhood is covered so that not even a rat can climb out of a garbage can without us knowing. Tell us where they are and we'll go get them."

"No," Elmer said calmly. "You won't do any such thing. Your men will stay where they are and—just wait."

"Do you know where Sharon is?" Adeline asked.

"Yes," Elmer sighed. "I know."

"Do you want us to stop looking?" Stan asked.

"Keep on if you want to," Elmer shrugged. "You won't find them."

"I think I know what Elmer means," Adeline said slowly. "He means that the man in the blue serge suit will kill Sharon if you find them."

"He would," Elmer corrected her. "But he won't, because you won't find them."

"So we just wait?" Stan asked.

"That's right," Elmer said. A wan smile flicked briefly over his face. "Believe me. I know what I'm talking about. And while we're waiting, would someone like to make some coffee for us? I'm sure Miss Roit would feel better having some—and I would too."

"I'll make it if you'll be good enough to tell me where things are," the doctor spoke up. "I think we could all use some. Especially if we have to do much waiting. Will we have to do much waiting, Mr. Wilde?" There was a shade of sarcasm in the question.

"That," Elmer said. "Depends on—Anna."

"Oh," Stan exclaimed, a light dawning on him. "So Anna will find them. I should have guessed."

"Who's Anna?" the doctor asked, holding the coffee pot under the faucet.

"Anna would be technically classified as an albino python," Elmer said. "She is a housepet, just as Sheo here is. She is intensely loyal and protective toward those she loves. Her sense of smell is keener even than that of a bloodhound. At this moment I would

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say that, rather than looking for Sharon, she has already found her, and is probably waiting for some opening to suggest itself so that she can rescue her without giving the man in the blue serge suit a chance to harm her."

Stan frowned at Elmer as he was making this lengthy explanation. He caught Adeline's frown, too, and knew that she was thinking what he was—that Elmer's omniscience was strangely missing where Anna's actions were concerned. Or was he being cagey? It would, he thought, have been more in character for Elmer to say, "Sharon will be rescued at such and such a time."

He went into the front room, closing the kitchen door. The coroner and city police were still there. Stan put his arm on the coroner's shoulder and guided him out onto the porch.

"I want something done in a bigger hurry than you ever did anything before," he began, speaking in a low voice that wouldn't carry. "I don't know how much of an effort, if any, might be made to get the body in there away from us. Take it down to the morgue—or better yet, take it to some hospital or laboratory where you can take X-rays. Stereoptican X-rays would be best. Get blood samples, tissue samples, and all sorts of data. What I want you and whoever you call in to work with you to do is to be able to classify that thing in there. See if it is related to the snake family or any other family of creatures here on Earth. I have a hunch you will find it is—that it is a member of some race that evolved right here on Earth someplace. Will you do that? And get the report to me here within the next two hours?"

"That's a tall order, Mr. Roit," the coroner answered; but Stan saw the gleam of excitement in his eyes and knew that he would.

"One thing," Stan said earnestly. "Don't for a minute relax your guard. Keep at least ten police within sight of you on this until it's all over. Take at least three X-rays of everything, too."

He looked at his watch. It was fifteen after three. He looked around for a phone. There didn't seem to be one. He wanted to call and find out the results of the atom bomb explosion in the stratosphere. He hesitated, hating to leave without saying anything.

Then, making up his mind, he stepped around the men who were lifting the corpse into a wicker basket and left the house, crossing the street to his car at a rapid trot.

Four blocks down Sixty-fourth he pulled to the curb with a grunt of satisfaction. There was a corner drug store. Two minutes later he was listening to a report on the bombings. He listened for five minutes, muttered a dazed "Thanks, sir," and returned to his car.

He drove very slowly back to the house, the dazed expression remaining on his face all the way. As he stepped through the front door he heard a loud, coarse voice in the kitchen.

"Blue serge, quawk-quawk-quawk-quawk. Blue serge, quawk-quawk-quawk-quawk."

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A delighted expression came onto his face. He snapped his fingers.

"That's what I was missing!" Stan murmured to himself. "Luke was gone." He pushed open the kitchen door.

Sharon was lying in Adeline's arms. The doctor was bending over her. He straightened up as Stan entered.

"Drugged," he said. "She may not wake up for hours, but she's all right."

Over in one corner the huge snake, Anna, was coiled up in a mountainous heap, her head lifted. She seemed to Stan to be nervous and tense.

The back door to the garage was open. Sounds of men came from there.

Elmer Wilde was still sitting where he had been when Stan had left. He was holding a cup of coffee now. He glanced up at Stan with a brief flash of a smile, then lowered his gaze again.

Stan crossed the kitchen to the back door and looked into the garage. Federal men and police were lowering a shapeless hulk in blue serge from the rafters. There was a small platform up there, made for storage. It was so small and inconspicuous that no one had noticed it. That, Stan saw, was where Blue Serge had been hiding —and he had drugged Sharon so she wouldn't be able to give him away.

He turned back into the kitchen. Adeline had eyes only for Sharon. The doctor was pausing at the door, preparing to leave. Stan could see he was nervous at the presence of the huge snake. He smiled and nodded his dismissal. The doctor fled. Elmer, his white face drawn and tired, kept his eyes on his coffee cup as if it were all that existed.

In the far corner Anna, still coiled in a heap, looked across the room at Stan, her bright red eyes, half as large as a man's watching him fixedly.

"You do not need to be afraid." The words formed in Stan's mind slowly. He suddenly realized that he *had* been afraid. The huge snake, free in the same room, had awakened an instinctive fear. But the words—it was almost as if they had been spoken and he had heard them, though there had been no audible sound.

"Poor Sharon, quawk-quawk-quawk-quawk," Luke's voice erupted at Stan's elbow. He turned, startled. The albino crow, its feathers rumpled, was huddled up on the drain board.

Adeline had looked up as Luke spoke.

"What happened?" Stan asked. "I was down at the drugstore using the phone when it all happened."

It was Elmer Wilde who answered.

"That fellow hid in the garage," he explained. "I knew he was there. I also knew that he would kill her if he thought he was going to be captured. Anna, of course, knew where he was too. She went out in back and waited until things quieted down. Then she slipped into the garage and got him. He had been planning on waiting there until the police gave up and

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went away."

"Anna brought Sharon into the kitchen," Adeline spoke up. "That was the first we knew that she had succeeded in finding her."

"Where was Luke during all this?" Stan asked, glancing affectionately at the ludicrously huddled bird.

"Out like a light behind the davenport," Elmer said, grinning. "I think he must have been struck during the fight in the front room when those two men first came in and Anna killed one of them while the other was fighting me."

Stan's eyes turned again to the huge snake. She was watching him, motionless as marble.

"How's your arm, Ad?" he asked, jerking his eyes away.

"It doesn't bother me," Adeline answered. "The doctor said it would start hurting pretty soon though. But he gave me some pills to lessen the pain."

"I was phoning," Stan said, studying the smooth inhuman curving of Anna's large mouth. "Everything turned out just as you said it would, Mr. Wilde." He was thinking of a series of drawings in a book that had shown how a boa constrictor's jaws unhinge so that the mouth can take in an object almost a foot and a half in diameter. Anna's head was lowering slowly—almost sleepily.

"I'm glad," Elmer said. He didn't look up or smile. He held the nearly empty coffee cup in his hands and idly swirled it around.

"Well," Stan said. He found that his eyes had started looking at Anna's again and jerked them away. "Everything's okay now. I have to get down to the office so I can be there when the reports come in on those two bodies. Adeline, I think I'd better take you home. Sharon will be all right. won't she?"

"I'm going to stay," Adeline said.

"Sharon will be all right," Elmer said, setting the cup down and taking the little girl from Adeline's lap. "Your brother is right. You'd better go home for now."

"Come on, Ad," Stan said firmly. "I'll run you to the apartment and then go to the office." He looked at the red eyes of the huge snake. The head was resting on the small mountain of coiled body now, the blunt nose glistening wet, the rest a dull, oily white.

Adeline was looking at Elmer with that strange light in her eyes again. Stan crossed over and took her good arm in his fingers.

"Come on, Ad," he repeated.

"I'll be back in the morning, Elmer," Adeline said.

"All right," he said. He was holding Sharon in his arms. He looked up briefly and smiled, then lowered his eyes again.

Sheo was lying on his stomach watching things, his tail wagging good naturedly. Luke was huddled on the drainboard, looking for all the world like a badly moth-eaten stuffed bird on a taxidermist's counter. Anna was a motionless mound of white with two red beads for eyes. Elmer was standing in the middle of the floor, his face hidden in Sharon's tousled curls.

Stan let the kitchen door swing

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shut on the scene, and kept his fingers around Adeline's arm until she climbed into the car.

* * *

Stan opened his eyes. The alarm clock was buzzing with heartless insistence. He reached out to shut it off. A dozen freight cars banged together inside his skull, mashing his brain into painful, throbbing pulp.

He sank back with a groan and let the alarm keep on buzzing. Memory of last night was flooding in. The mood of last night was coming with it, too. His lips twisted into a sneer of self hate.

With infinite caution he lifted himself out of bed. The sinking feeling he had felt when he had watched the plane take off returned, to add to the torture of the combined hang-over and after effects of the blow on the head he had received.

"Are you up, Stan?"

It was Adeline's voice from the kitchen.

"Ohhh," Stan groaned. "Yeah," he said loud enough for her to hear. He recited a long list of words quietly to himself while he struggled into his bathrobe.

He looked longingly at the bedside telephone, a half formed plan in his mind to call for an ambulance and take a two weeks rest cure before facing Adeline.

"Hurry up, Stan," Adeline called impatiently.

"Coming," he answered, resigning himself to what had to be.

Ten minutes later he entered the kitchen. A hot shower had helped his frame of mind considerably.

"How's the arm, Ad," he asked, not looking at her.

"Hurts," she said laconically. "Oh, brother! Do you look like the last rose of summer! Maybe I'd better put your black coffee in a hypo and shoot it right into your blood stream."

Stan's eyes focused on the trim breakfast table with its red plaid tablecloth and blue plaid cloth design dishes, and two cups of steaming coffee.

Something twisted at his heart and turned on the bitter sneer again. "God!" he thought. "I deserve shooting."

"Come on," Adeline said cheerfully. "Wake up. Life can be beautiful."

"It can be ugly, too," Stan grumbled, lowering himself carefully into his place at the table. "Ugly!"

"Not after a nice breakfast and you get out in the sunshine and see how beautiful it really is," Adeline said. "Come on. I want to get this over so I can run over and see how Sharon is this morning. Wish they had a phone."

"Oh," Stan said. He lifted his coffee cup and swallowed in sudden pain. "Hot!" he said, spilling some of it on his plate as he set the cup down.

Adeline was at the stove turning the eggs over in the frying pan, humming cheerfully. Stan looked at her back, his eyes bleak.

"Adeline—" he said hesitatingly.

"Yes?" she said quickly, turning her head and smiling at him.

"Is your arm stiff—or anything?"

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he asked.

"It's sore," Adeline replied, turning her attention back to the eggs. "But I had it under the infra red lamp for ten minutes before I got up this morning. That took most of the stiffness out of it."

Adeline brought the frying pan over to the table and lifted two eggs out onto Stan's plate. The third egg went on her own plate. Setting the pan back on the stove she sat down and buttered the two pieces of toast, wincing at the pain in her arm.

Stan accepted his piece of toast without looking at her, and opened the paper lying beside his plate. His eyes blurred as he tried to focus them on the newsprint, but he pretended to be engrossed in the paper, as usual at breakfast.

Adeline glanced at him occasionally, her eyes happy. She would start humming softly to herself and catch herself and stop. Stan continued to pretend to read, forcing himself to eat a little.

Finally he shoved back his plate and concentrated on his coffee.

"All you want?" Adeline asked.

"Uh," he grunted, keeping his eyes on the paper.

She rose and picked up the plates. The water ran soapily into the dishpan.

"Finish your coffee, Stan," she ordered. "I want to get going."

"Where?" Stan asked foolishly.

"Why, over to see how Sharon is, of course," Adeline said.

"No use your going," Stan said gruffly. He thought, "This is it."

Adeline's arms became suddenly motionless in the dishpan. She turned her head slowly to face her brother.

"No use my going?" she echoed wonderingly. "What do you mean?"

"They've gone back to Africa," he said, plunging. Then he held his breath.

"No!" Adeline exclaimed. "You're fooling me. Aren't you?"

Stan shook his head, misery in his eyes.

"Did—did they take Luke with them?" she asked, looking stunned. She turned back to the sink suddenly. Her shoulders humped.

Quickly Stan rose to his feet and was beside her, his arms around her.

"Don't cry, Sis," he soothed, the sneer of self hate on his face.

"I'm not crying," she answered, her voice sounding smothered.

She shook herself free of her brother's arms and stepped away, brushing her red hair back from her forehead with a soapy arm.

"After all," she said with an attempt at carelessness. "There's nothing to cry about, is there? They didn't want me, or they wouldn't have gone away without saying goodbye, would they?"

"You didn't really want to get tied up with that guy," Stan said gruffly. "After all, he's the next thing to God. He isn't exactly human. You wouldn't have been happy with him."

"You don't know what you're saying," Adeline said, her voice close to breaking into sobs. "He's —he's just a little boy. He's afraid, and there's no one to put their

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arms around him and give him a feeling of being loved. Do—do you suppose that's the reason he ran away? That he thought it wouldn't be good for *me* to marry him? That must be it! There couldn't be any other reason for Elmer to do this. He's afraid."

She turned back to the sink and started washing dishes violently.

"Well," she said grimly. "I'm not going to let him do it. I'm going right down to Africa after him. Just—as—s o o n—as—I—finish—the—dishes." She ended her remark with an emphatic dip of her red head.

"Oh, God," Stan groaned. "How would you find him?"

"I'll find him," Adeline said grimly.

She dumped out the dishwater and wiped the pan with the dishcloth and put it under the sink.

"Or rather," she added, a sudden thought lighting her eyes. "He'd better meet me when I get there. He'll know I'm coming."

"Stop it, Ad," Stan said angrily. "You know it's no good. What would you do? Live in an abandoned African temple? Never see a show again—and argue with a boa constrictor on how to raise Sharon? Bring them back here and start a new cult with Elmer sitting on a throne? Even the gold braid is more than half convinced he must be a god. That guided missile we sent up intercepted one coming down. They measured things on the films of the stratosphere explosion and figured the odds as twenty million to one that they couldn't repeat that interception with their own rockets, knowing all the data and timing. They're sold enough on Elmer so that they instantly put the latest long-range bomber at his disposal when I—." He stopped.

"When *you*?" Adeline took it up, dawning suspicion in her expression. "What did *you* have to do with it?"

She advanced toward him belligerently. He backed away.

"Come to think of it," she went on. "What *did* you have to do with it? Things must have happened very suddenly. Yesterday at four in the afternoon I left there. This morning you have a hangover, and they've gone to Africa. Did you go back and pull a noble brother act and tell him to scram? Answer me!"

Stan's back was pressed against the wall. Adeline was prodding his chest with her finger to punctuate every word.

"Please, Ad," he pleaded. "It was only for your—I mean—well, what if I did?" His eyes became angry. "I have to look out for you, don't I? It was your happiness I was thinking about."

Adeline stepped back, an incredulously amused look on her face.

"So the God complex has infected *you*!" she jeered. "You presume to decide who my husband will be! No wonder Elmer went back to Africa. He's just the kind of noble, self-sacrificing *man* who would think he was doing right when the heel of a brother sneaks behind his sister's back and growls at him that he's no good for dear little sister. Well, you listen to me.

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I might not have gone after him before, but after that kind of a play I am. And if you know what's good for you you'll go with me and see that I get there all right. If you don't I'll—I'll—."

"You'll what?" Stan asked.

"I'll stay there and never come back and never write you," she said.

"How do you do, sir," Luke purred, making a clumsy landing on the edge of a stone block on which rested a bust so weather-worn it was barely recognizable as having once represented a human head. He cocked a pink eye at the worn face coyly, then glanced over the clearing. "Ohmigod! Snakes!" he squawked. "Oh boy, am I drunk. Quawwwk."

With a few more clucks he settled down, ruffling out his white feathers and closing his eyes against the sunlight that bathed the clearing with glaring brilliance.

Surrounding the clearing on three sides were immense tropical trees with thick smooth branches from which hung mossy tendrils and the green shoots of vines. Not a breath of air stirred the motionlessness of the scene.

At Luke's back rose the ruins of a sprawling, one-storied building, its thick stone walls covered with inscriptions that had been almost worn smooth by wind and rain.

There was no slightest motion anywhere; but the sounds of delighted laughter from the mouth of a little girl disturbed the silence. Added to this sound from time to time was the sharp barking of a dog, the explosive sound causing the several huge pythons draped in sleep along the branches of trees to stir restlessly.

From far away came the faint sounds of the African jungle; the cough of a lion, the chattering of monkeys. There came also another sound—a faint murmur that rose in volume almost imperceptibly. It held a definite rhythm—words repeated in unison, over and over again, by many voices.

Suddenly a figure emerged from the shadows of the opening into the ancient building. It was Elmer Wilde, his face expressionless as he listened to the approaching sound.

He knew what it meant. The temple and the area for miles around was avoided by the native blacks unless they had definite business there—and then they announced their presence by the chant they were now voicing, so as to have the protection of *abwallah*.

Sharon appeared behind Elmer and quietly came to his side, reaching up and slipping her hand in his. Their eyes were fixed on the same spot—an opening at the far corner of the clearing where a well worn path emerged from the jungle. Neither father nor daughter said anything as they waited.

The chant grew louder, partly with the increased volume of lessened distance, and partly with the increase in volume as the blacks approached the most dread place, to them, in all Africa.

They could be seen now through the underbrush—black, darting

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figures. Suddenly they were at the edge of the clearing, lowering baskets and boxes carefully to the ground and backing down the path the way they had come.

Elmer and Sharon ignored these. Their eyes stared unblinking until two other figures emerged.

"It's Adeline, Daddy!" Sharon exclaimed in delighted surprise.

"I know," he said. There was no surprise in his smile as he advanced across the clearing to welcome the two. Sharon ran ahead and threw herself in Adeline's arms.

"Hi, Elmer," Stan said, a wry smile on his perspiring face. Elmer's smile widened. He nodded his head knowingly.

Adeline was on her knees, her arms around Sharon, her face hidden in Sharon's tousled curls. Suddenly she looked up at Elmer, her expression half afraid.

"Hello, Elmer," she said shyly.

"Hello, Adeline," he answered simply.

"She's going to be my mommy now, isn't she, Daddy?" Sharon asked, looking up at her father.

"Don't answer that!" Adeline spoke quickly, sharply.

"Why?" Elmer asked, surprise in his eyes for the first time.

"Because," Adeline said. "Because if you say yes I'll never marry you, and if you say no I'll marry you if I have to drug you to do it."

Elmer looked at Stan who spread his arms in a gesture of helplessness and rolled his eyes heavenward. He frowned at this and turned his eyes back to Adeline.

"But don't you know—" he began.

"Don't say it!" Adeline warned. She was standing now, her arm protectively around Sharon's shoulder, her eyes flashing.

"B-b-but what is this?" Elmer blurted. "I thought—" He stopped, bewildered. A delighted look was appearing on Stan's face.

"It's just that I'm going to cure you of knowing things or I'm not going to marry you," Adeline blurted, her voice breaking in the middle of the sentence and growing firm again. "Some women marry drunks and lead a miserable existence. It would be the same thing. Unless you swear off of knowing things, I won't marry you."

"But—" Elmer clamped his lips together like a door closing.

"See?" Stan said maliciously. Unless he can prophesy he is tongue-tied."

"It's not that," Elmer said. "And you keep out of this, Stanley. It's none of your business anyway."

"None of my *business*?" Stan said, glaring. "I have to walk half way across—."

"Shut up," Adeline shouted. Then, sweetly, "What were you saying, Elmer?"

"Would you want me if I didn't —know things?" he asked.

"That's the only way I would want you, Elmer," Adeline said. She lowered her eyes. "I—I couldn't stand your knowing when I was going to die—."

"You're going to live to be over eighty," Elmer broke in.

"And knowing when I would get hurt or sick—." She paused and

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looked at Elmer expectantly. He kept silent. "See?" she added. "Right now I suspect you know I'm going to get hurt or something!"

"But if I can't help knowing things how can I stop knowing them?" Elmer asked, exasperated.

"That's the same line alcoholics hand out," Stan said quickly. He shot a triumphant look at both Elmer and Adeline over his success at getting in a word. When they didn't make any remark he tried another shot. "Anyway," he said. "There's already one thing Elmer was wrong about."

A sudden, wondering expression flashed on Elmer's face.

"So there is!" he said softly.

"What?" Adeline asked, looking from Elmer to her brother.

"He didn't know you were going to act this way," Stan said, smiling.

"Maybe it's happened!" Elmer went on as if he hadn't heard them. "If it has—."

He darted a glance at Stan and Adeline.

"Come into the temple," he invited. "I'm going to tell you something, and it may take a while to get it out."

The wall of white marble was flawless. Not a crack or seam could be discerned in its entire expanse. The thousands of exquisite carvings that laced its surface reflected the flame of the torch in jeweled gleams of white perfection.

"This is the inner room of perhaps the oldest man-made structure on the Earth," Elmer explained quietly. "Father estimated it to be nearly seventy thousand years old. He was never able to decipher the meanings of the symbols. The snake—" he pointed to the life-size, vividly detailed carving of a white boa constrictor that spread across the wall "—is of course modeled from the ancestors of the same snakes that live here to this day. They are found no place else in the world. But notice the position of the python. The head is stretched out horizontally, and so is the tail. Toward the middle it arches upward in a graceful hump."

He waved his hand to encompass the entire wall.

"These symbols," he said. "I know their meanings. They tell a story I've been afraid to reveal to anyone—even my father when he was alive. They reveal that far before the dawn of known history there was a race of beings who built this temple, and who knew modern mathematics! But they knew even more. Oh, I'm not talking about their science.

"I don't know anything about their science, though I know it was advanced enough for them to drive away the ancestors of those serpent-men who tried to return here to Earth—and would have if I had not been able to talk the United States into doing the things necessary to defeat them. But I do know from the writings on this wall how I—know things."

He flashed Adeline an apologetic smile.

"And that's what I want to tell you about," he went on. "When I was fourteen I was studying mathematics. My mother taught me

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everything, and I had more or less drifted into a routine of mastering the books she gave me as text books, and just consulting her when I got stuck.

"One day the unnatural position of this snake carved in the wall struck me. I didn't know the meanings of any of the inscriptions then. I was studying calculus at the time. I waited until one day when my father was sure not to disturb me, and carefully measured points from the floor to the axis line of the snake at one foot intervals. In that way I obtained sixteen pairs of co-ordinates for a mathematical curve. I had no idea what that curve would be. In fact, I was doing it merely as an exercise in mathematics."

He paused and watched Stan pull out his lighter and light the cigarette that had been dangling from his lips for some time. Sharon was hugging close to Adeline, who still had her arm protectively over her shoulders. Sheo was with them now, sitting just behind Sharon, his tongue hanging out.

"Even when I obtained the equation of that curve," Elmer went on, "I didn't realize its significance for a long time."

He looked embarrassed as he went on.

"I might have told my father about the equation," he said. "But he was always very engrossed in his attempts to get some sort of clue to the meaning of the symbols on the walls, and never encouraged me to discuss what I found out."

In the wavering light of the torch his expression became dreamy. His eyes took on a faraway look.

"That equation intrigued me. I found it listed in a math book—a modern math book. Just a coincidence? I thought so at the time, though I was not adult enough in my thinking to have placed any importance on the possibilities implied if the curve assumed by the snake were deliberate on the part of the carvers. But unconsciously I grew more attracted to the subject of that mathematical equation. I thoroughly mastered every phase of the mathematics concerning that equation—and then it happened. I came in here one day when my father was here, poring over the symbols. Suddenly *I knew the meanings of some of them.* I tried to tell him so—and he shut me up."

Elmer turned his face away, hiding his expression.

"Then I knew that I could never tell him," he said, his voice muffled. "I was a child. He was a trained scientist, devoting his life to the solving of these inscriptions. If I solved them for him it would be a death blow to his pride. I never told him. After I had translated the entire wall I knew—then—that I could never tell anyone. No one would believe me. I'm going to tell you two—after I've performed a little ritual."

He reached his hand in a pocket and brought out a pack of playing cards. He sat down crosslegged and shuffled them on the stone floor.

"Cut?" he said, looking up at Stan cheerfully. Stan bent down and cut the cards, noting the

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strained expression on Elmer's face. He straightened up again slowly, remembering the reports on Elmer's ability to predict the sequence of all fifty-two cards in a shuffled deck for ten consecutive shuffles before they were made.

"Seven of clubs," Elmer said. He turned the top card over. It was the six of diamonds.

"That's the second time you've been wrong," Stan exclaimed.

"And I'll keep on being wrong," Elmer said, a happy twinkle in his eyes. He put the cards back in his pocket and stood up. "Now I can tell you the whole thing. You see, it all went back to the full implications of that curve of the snake on on the wall. Oh, there are a lot of philosophical meanings to it, too; but the real gist of it is in demonstrable mathematics.

"I'll give you a concrete illustration of what I want to explain. Suppose you have a deck of playing cards—like I just had—and an audience of ten thousand people, and you asked each one in the audience to guess what the top card was. How many would guess right?"

"Ten thousand divided by fifty-two," Stan answered. "About two hundred of them."

"That's right," Elmer agreed. "And if you had each member of the audience guess each consecutive card you would have some that guessed a few of them right—and maybe one who guessed them all correctly. But he would do so purely by chance instead of any omniscience or extra-sensory-perception.

"He would guess thirty correctly and think, 'Oh no! Next time I'll guess wrong!' and his next guess would be right. He would guess fifty-one c o r r e c t l y and think, 'Surely I'll be wrong on the last one! I can't even remember what cards have been turned over!' And his last guess would be correct—purely by chance. Always chance.

"Do you see what I'm driving at? The world's people are a vast audience of billions of individuals—all guessing, with their guesses narrowed down by experience, memory, and k n o w l e d g e, but guessing nevertheless. In America there are business men, all guessing. The laws of chance say that some of them will guess wrong most of the time—and others will guess right most of the time. A rare one will go for years without making a wrong guess, and amass a fortune.

"In the same way a rare individual in the human race will attain what seems to be omniscience—without knowing—only guessing. Each guess will be right. He will wonder. Then he will begin to think there is some reason for his guesses always being right. He may finally believe himself to be a god. Others may think him a god—or with some sort of divine omniscience."

Elmer turned to the wall and laid his finger on the huge head of the carved serpent.

"Here is the seat of wisdom of the python," he said solemnly. "And here," his hand reached up to a circled carving far up on the wall. "Is the serpent that swallowed it-

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self, signifying that there is no difference between the head and the tail.

"Consider all humanity as being under the arched serpent. The bulk of mankind will guess wrong part of the time and right part of the time. They will be in the middle and crowd the snake upward. But those who guess right most of the time will be rare. Those who guess right all the time, without ever guessing wrong, will be extremely rare—perhaps one every generation or less. And each time they guess they stand the same chance of being wrong as the poor guesser! At any time their seeming omniscience may leave them—since they never really had it.

"And," Elmer turned to look at Adeline. "I knew that. I knew that my omniscience was just—guesses. I knew that each succeeding one might be wrong. Each time I—knew something, I feared that *this* time I would be wrong. Now it's happened. I've been wrong twice. My run of luck has ended. From now on I'll never be able to count on my guesses being right."

"You mean," Stan spoke up. "That all those experiments on ESP at Duke University and other places conform to the laws of chance alone, and that there is no actual ESP?"

"I don't actually know," Elmer replied. "All I know is that the laws of chance produce strings of guesses of any length that are correct. Any such experiments will produce results of that nature. I went through the tests with a perfect score. If I went through again I would probably get a perfect zero."

"But what about those predictions about an invasion?" Stan persisted. "What about the split second interception of that rocket?"

"Guesses," Elmer said. "Nothing but guesses."

"What about Anna?" Stan asked suspiciously. "What about my feeling that she communicated with me by t h o u g h t? What about Sharon's claiming to talk to Anna by telepathy?"

"Have you ever seen a child talk with her doll?" Elmer asked.

"I talk with my doll," Sharon volunteered helpfully.

Adeline looked down at Sharon and smiled at her. Stan saw that from the corner of his eye. But he felt Elmer's intent stare, and as Adeline looked down at Sharon he saw Elmer wink at him pleadingly.

He waited a few seconds, digesting the full meaning of that wink. "So," he thought. "Adeline insists that he swear off of knowing things. Maybe he's got the answer."

He relaxed and smiled.

"You know," he said expansively. I think you've hit it. I think that's the answer to a lot of things in history: Napoleon, Hitler, J. P. Morgan, and even you, Elmer. And now that you can guess wrong you'll be just an ordinary guy. You always were, anyway. You never got the idea that just because you always guessed right you were something special. Most lucky guessers eventually think they are."

"I always knew it," Adeline said,

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her eyes dancing with happiness. "I sensed that fear you had, Elmer. I didn't know what it was, but I do now. It was a fear that this time you'd be wrong."

"Then will you marry me now?" Elmer asked.

"That's what I wanted you to say," Adeline said, taking her arm from Sharon's shoulders and walking toward Elmer. "No girl wants her man to say, 'You're going to marry me.' She wants him to ask her, '*will* you marry me?' "

She paused a foot from Elmer, her eyes glowing. Elmer reached out and she stepped into his arms.

"Is Adeline going to be my mommy now, Daddy?" Sharon asked.

Stan picked her up and set her on his shoulders.

"Come on," he said. "Let's leave your daddy and your new mommy to themselves. By the way, did you know I'm going to be your new uncle?"

From the topmost pinnacle of the temple Elmer looked across the jungle and saw the puffs of smoke rising into the cloudless sky. It was the answer to his own signal. The black village was sending porters. They were on their way. In a few hours now they would arrive and he would say goodbye to the place that had been his home for his entire life.

He had not wanted to leave, but—.

Slowly he climbed down. Stan had been standing away from the building where he could watch him. As Elmer reached the ground a smile flickered briefly on his face.

"Stay here with Sharon and Adeline," he said. "I'll be back shortly. I—I'm going to say goodbye to a friend of mine."

He walked around the front of the temple and vanished into the jungle. His feet followed a barely discernible trail that led to the rear of the sprawling ruins of the temple, and then struck out in a straight line.

Here, though it was midday and the sun was directly overhead in a cloudless sky, a perpetual gloom hung in the atmosphere. Lecherous vegetation that had never felt the direct rays of the sun twisted in tortuous profusion. Here and there the ethereal beauty of an orchid stood out to startle the eye.

Yet, no sound nor movement disturbed this place—except for Elmer himself as he walked purposefully along.

He was thinking of the first time he had been permitted to walk along this path. He had tried many times before that time, and always the way had been barred by the giant bulk of some huge snake, gently but firmly forcing him to turn back. It was only when he had solved the mystery of the curved python that he had found the way unguarded.

It was unguarded now. Perhaps for the last time. Perhaps never again would he be permitted to walk down this trail.

Ahead of him a large mound rose into the obscurity of the trees. The trail led to a dark opening at the base of the mound. Without hesitation he pushed aside the vines that partially obscured this opening and stepped into the

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darkness.

Almost immediately a rectangle of light appeared ahead. He walked toward this—reached it—and stepped out into a place that defied description.

Overhead, hovering close to the roof of flawless marble, was a light. It was a pulsing, throbbing light that, Elmer knew, was yet not a light, for it existed only in his mind. Its pulsing matched the pulsations of life force in his body. Its throbbing matched his heartbeat.

Revealed in the light were three pedestals, and on each pedestal was the giant mound of coils of a white serpent—alive, but motionless.

"I've come to say goodbye," he said. "I don't want to, but you have insisted. Will I ever come back?"

"That we cannot tell you," a voice formed in his mind. "You have done what you had to do, and now you are free. That is enough for you to know."

Elmer looked at the three giant heads with their red eyes. He hesitated, then turned away.

"Wait!" the thought sounded peremptorily in his mind. He turned back.

Into his mind came the memory of things he had read on the walls of the temple. Of how, in the dim past before man had appeared on the face of the Earth, there had arisen a race of giant snakes who achieved intelligence, but who did not have the bodily equipment to create machines.

By thought alone they had mastered the mysteries of reality. For millions of years they had flourished, the supreme creation on Earth, with a mathematics and philosophy far in advance of anything man would ever achieve—but without tools or hands, or anything that could survive the inroads of time to tell modern man of their existence and their achievements.

And now—here in the heart of an African jungle were the last remnants of that race.

A great pity welled up in Elmer for these giant serpents, so wise, and yet—.

Too wise, for they had no illusions. Masters of illusion, able to create vivid dream worlds such as the one he was now seeing—yet unable to create one for themselves that would give them the spirit once again to flourish and re-create that civilization of the past.

As if to counter his pity for them, a picture rose in Elmer's mind of the human race itself — millions of little creatures running madly about, treasuring each illusion, dreaming great dreams, fighting great battles for ideals as firm as the sands of the desert—and as shifting.

But there was no pity. Only a tenderness and affection. Then suddenly it was gone. The light was gone, and all the feelings and thoughts of the moment before.

About him was a quiet rustling and slithering of unseen bodies in the darkness. He turned slowly until he could see the faint light that seeped into the cave from the entrance. He stumbled forward.

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holding out his arms to protect him.

The jungle seemed somehow different as he hurried back the way he had come. It seemed somehow aloof from him—as if he were a stranger to it. An urge was growing in him to get away. He broke into a trot.

He reached the back of the temple. Then a glad cry escaped his lips.

"Anna!" he said.

Anna was waiting for him.

"I'm glad you were here, Anna," Elmer said. "I wanted to say goodbye to you."

He went up to the snake and laid his hand on the flat of her head. Then, slowly, he withdrew his hand, a puzzled frown furrowing his forehead.

It was Anna. There was no mistake. Yet—in some strange way—she was now just a snake. A domesticated snake who had been his pet and g u a r d i a n—and Sharon's.

A sense of loss overwhelmed him. Tears came to his eyes. He dropped to his knees beside her and held her head in his arms.

"Please, Anna," he said softly.

Then suddenly he knew he would never be back. No one would ever know that it had been Anna who had guided him through the ESP tests—had told him of the invasion from space, and that he of himself had never been anything but a normal human being.

Already the past was growing unreal and f a n t a s t i c in his thoughts. Already he was beginning to doubt that Anna had ever spoken to him in his thoughts. A fleeting suspicion formed in him that this was being done to condition him to stay away.

"Hello, Luke. Hello, Luke." The rasping voice of the albino crow exploded in the jungle quiet. There was a flash of white and the bird landed on his shoulder.

Anna withdrew her head and glided away. Elmer stood up and watched her vanish in the underbrush, then continued on around to the front of the temple.

"Daddy, where have you been?" Sharon scolded. "We're all ready to go back to America."

The blacks were standing about, uneasy in the presence of the motionless, s l e e p i n g pythons stretched out in front of the temple.

"Ready, d a r l i n g?" Adeline asked, looking searchingly into Elmer's eyes.

He turned and looked at the temple, at the symbols that covered its front wall. It no longer seemed home. It seemed like what it really was—a ruin that was being slowly obliterated by the inroads of jungle vegetation. He blinked back the tears and turned away.

Adeline was still looking at him. He looked into her eyes and felt a sense of peace and happiness.

"Yes," he said. "I'm ready—now."

His words were a signal that started a bustle of movement. The blacks lifted their loads to their shoulders. Sheo, the white Collie, ran about, barking excitedly. A column formed.

Stan lifted Sharon into a chair

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fastened between two poles that rested on the broad shoulders of two porters. Adeline climbed into another and sat back as the blacks lifted it into the air. The column began to move. A chant of deep voices rose as the blacks moved into the jungle.

Luke jumped from Elmer's shoulder and flew awkwardly to land beside Sharon and settle down, clucking contentedly, beside her.

Elmer and Stan paused at the edge of the jungle to look back. Then they followed the blacks. Soon the chant of the natives to protect them from the guardians of the temple died in the distance.

The sun, directly overhead, cast its blinding rays over the clearing. From far off came the faint cough of a lion and the chatter of monkeys.

There was a rattling sound as a chip broke loose from a corner of one of the stones of the temple and fell to the foot of a pedestal on which rested what had once been a bust of a man, a hundred centuries before Caesar.

Red eyes in huge, chiseled snake heads filmed over in sleep. And there was no movement, anywhere.

THE END

COMET FANTASY

DR. FRED L. WHIPPLE of Harvard College Observatory is an astronomer. As an astronomer, it is his business to scan the skies and explain the things he sees in scientific terms. Recently he answered a hitherto baffling enigma of space: what is a comet? Says he: it's a hunk of ice (frozen gases) which comes in from the outer boundaries of the solar system and melts when it gets close enough to the sun. You'll pardon us, Dr. Whipple, if we hint very delicately that you are ribbing us? We just don't believe it.

But, to go on, here's what Dr. Whipple tells us about comets. This solid nugget of ice is tiny, cosmically speaking; only a half-mile, or maybe as much as four miles, in diameter. The ice is made up of water, the solid forms of methane, ammonia, carbon monoxide and dioxide and nitride. Included are bits of solid stuff, like meteors. Surrounding all this is a shell of solid stuff, which is porous to the gases from the ice when it melts.

Now, coming in toward the sun, it gets hot, and the gases turn into a huge cloud surrounding the shell of solid stuff, and presto, we have a comet. The pressure of the sun's radiation pushes the gases into a tail form and sweeps it out away from the sun. Comets usually hide their tails coyly from the sun. A few comets have been observed with two tails, one pointing *toward* the sun (perverse thing!) and some even with multiple tails, pointing in all directions.

As the comet passes proudly by, it loses some of its gases (and its masses) and this accounts for the showers of meteoric matter when these solid pieces strike the earth's atmosphere.

English astronomer R. A. Lyttleton of Cambridge University supports Dr. Whipple by saying that a comet nucleus is formed by dust and gas pulled together by the sun's gravity. As an amateur astronomer, we'd partially agree, except to say it wasn't the sun's gravity, but its vortex, the same one that formed the sun itself, which does the construction job.

Dr. Whipple and the Rand scientists, who say space is hot, ought to get together!

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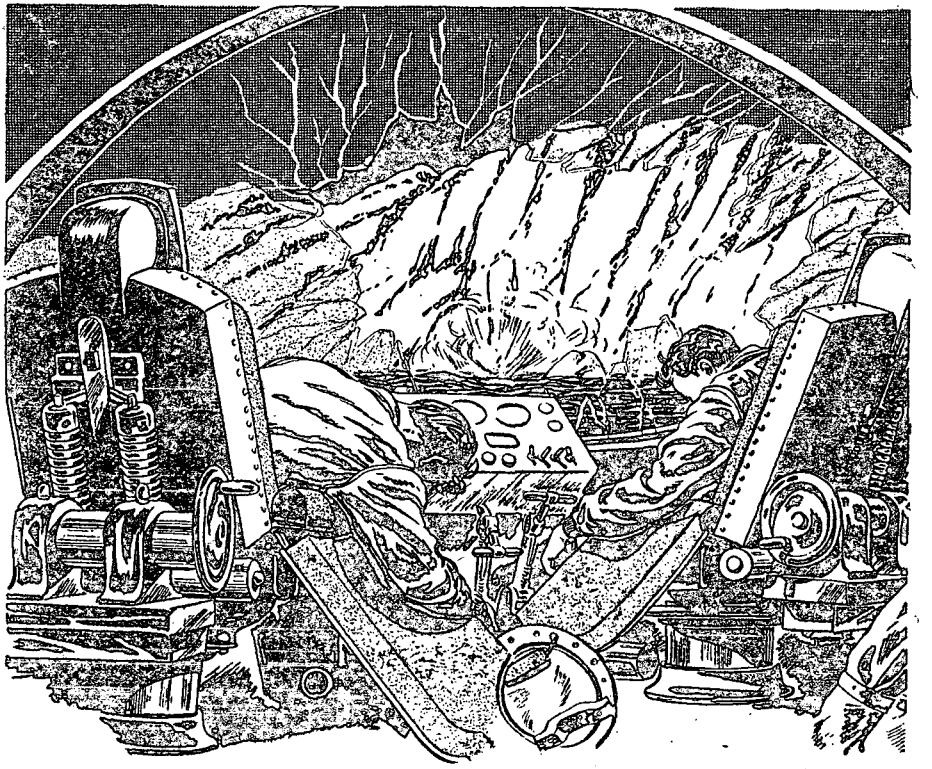

VENUS TROUBLE SHOOTER

by JOHN WILEY

THE Old Man's face was apoplectic behind his frayed black cigar. He made bullish breathing sounds while I closed the heavy walnut door behind me. Mentally I kissed fond farewell to the vacation I had been hoping to get. It would take at least two million dollars down the drain to make him this mad—and it would be my job to investigate that drain.

I'm his trouble shooter. My name is Stanwoody Cripe. Rumor has it that my great grandfather was a bankrobber and had to change his name. He didn't want to pick the obvious — Smith or Jones—and was at his wit's end trying to pick a good one. In desperation he started to say, "Cripes! I ought to be able to think of one!" But all he got out was "Cripe—;" then a delighted expression flitted across his face—and from that day

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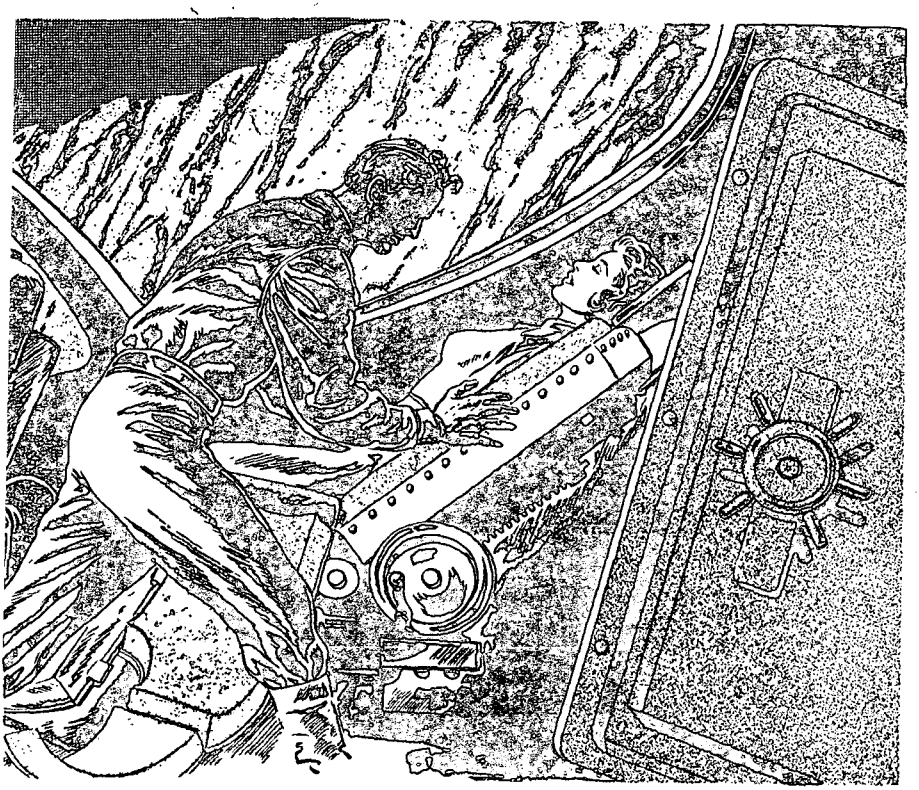

The two co-pilots were dead, but Mary Alice was alive . . .

You can't hide an eight-foot Venusian aboard a spaceship, unless he's a ghost; and if he's a ghost, he can't wreck a ship, but he did . . .

on he was a respectable business man by the name of Cripe.

Rumor also has it that my father wanted to name me Pipe. He was a poet, and Pipe rhymes with Cripe. Mom wanted to call me Stanley after the first guy she ever went with. They compromised on Stanwoody.

Be that as it may, my mother got her way in the end, because I'm generally called Stan, the woody and Cripe being used only when I get married or have to show my birth certificate or cash my paycheck.

The Old Man is Gregory Janes, President of Interplanetary Enterprises Incorporated — commonly known as IEI — pronounced like ayiy. The assets of IEI are three billions more than the national debt of the USA.

"You sent for me, GJ?"

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Instead of answering, he glared at me with glazed eyes for a long second, then picked something up from his desk and waved it in front of me. My eyes followed the thing back and forth until they had determined it was a nine by ten photo of some male employee.

"Take a look at this man," he said with a sort of quiet desperation in his voice. "Take a *good* look at him — because he is an O.T., a common operating technician, of which there are over a hundred thousand in Interplanetary Enterprises Incorporated."

I speared the photo and recognized who it was—Elmer Smith. Five-feet-seven, washed out blond hair, age twenty-three, weight a hundred and forty-odd, training B.Sc. in engineering and one year in the IEI p.g. school to fit him for his first job as O.T. in one of the power stations on Venus. That's where he was now.

"Take a *good* look," the old man was saying again in a desperately devout way. "He is one O.T. who is making ten—no, twelve—times as much as the President of IEI this year—*me!*"

So I did take a good look. I remembered Elmer's appearance. I had tagged it as "washed out." Besides washed out blond hair he had a sallow complexion, faded blue eyes, and an air of being numbed by novocaine when he moved. Also I did a little fast arithmetic and came up with the figure two million four hundred thousand dollars as what Elmer was making for the year.

That sum of money tugged familiarly at my memory. What was it cost exactly that much?

"You know our setup," the old man ground out through his shredded cigar. "We give the O.T. the cost sheets for the two years preceding his taking over, and guarantee him a salary plus fifty percent of anything he can lop off of operating expenses. Generally that makes the new O.T. do a lot of thinking about the finer points of his job, and in the long run IEI makes a fortune off of the patents it acquires from the small improvements he dreams up to earn a bonus of a few hundreds."

"So Elmer Smith hit the jackpot," I said innocently. Then I did a double take and wound up with a kind of silly, shocked feeling. The entire operating expenses of the type of station Elmer had been assigned to were about five millions a year—and that meant that Elmer had cut out practically *all* operating expenses!

Gregory Janes watched the play of expression on my face with a sort of malicious satisfaction. I would have liked to have seen it myself, because I felt like a drunk might feel if his pink elephants remained with him when he sobered up.

"Well!" I gasped. A sudden thought struck me. "Well!" I said, delighted. "This is wonderful! Elmer has discovered something that will revolutionize power. When IEI gets it into general usage we can write our own ticket. We can—"

"We can't do a thing," the old man said softly. "Elmer refuses to

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tell us how he did it. And—he—changed—everything—back."

"You mean," I asked slowly. "That he did it just to get the money, and intends to keep it secret instead of—oh, I get it; he wants more than the two million? Well, I don't blame him. Anybody smart enough to make a discovery like his must be, is also smart enough to figure out the angles."

Gregory Janes was shaking his head monotonously while I spoke. When I finished, he said:

"You've got it wrong. He isn't interested in the money particularly. In fact," he took a deep breath, "he seemed surprised to learn he had over two million coming to him for his year's work. He said—and these are his very words, 'I was just trying out something to see what would happen. I've found out, and don't like what happens, so please let's forget the whole thing.' Imagine that!"

Well, I *could* imagine it. What I imagined was a man using the IEI equipment to find out that an idea would work, and then trying to keep it secret and patent it later and reap all the benefits for himself—especially an idea that could bring unlimited electric power with no consumption of fuel.

I spent an afternoon bringing myself up to date on the details. Elmer Smith had been O.T. at plant 63 on Blinkum, one of the three major continents of Venus.

There are three major land masses on Venus. They are Winkum, Blinkum, and Nod. Of the three, Winkum is the one most favorable to life. The reason for that is its range of high mountains, the Sirrah Corscatehs, protecting it from the fierce heat of the sunward side of the planet.

Blinkum and Nod have no such high ranges, and consequently the ground velocity of the wind is terrific. The native Venusians all live on Winkum. Also there is greater development of Earth colonies on Winkum. But on Blinkum there are large mineral and oil deposits—a natural combination that makes for technological development.

The theoretical picture of Venus is surprisingly simple. The planet has no spin on any axis. It always presents the same side to the sun, like Luna does toward Earth. On the sunward side the seas boil constantly, sending steam upward. The steam goes so far and no farther. Above the blanket of steam rises a blanket of ammonia vapor and dust particles that hide the underblanket from probing spectroscopes. That's what fooled early astronomers about Venus.

On the area of Venus farthest away from the sun is a huge ice continent with ragged spires rising as high as five miles above ocean level. The stratospheric winds of Venus converge from the sunward side to this point where they drop and add to the ice continent all the time, and the cooling winds then strike out toward the sunward side close to the ocean, reaching velocities of one to two hundred miles per hour.

Winkum, Blinkum, and Nod form a sort of land belt that di-

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vides the sunward side of Venus from the rest. They lie on the dark side, just out of range of direct sunlight and heat rays. If it weren't for the terrific winds all three would be ideal. There are three gaps formed by the three breaks in the continent belt. Through these gaps, each no more than five hundred miles in width, ocean waters rush to the sunward side to replenish the evaporating waters.

On Winkum there is a lot of rain, due to the Sirrah Corscatehs which break the air current and shoot it up to form a turbulent space where moisture condenses. On Blinkum and Nod it seldom rains. There are no lush jungles, but only grass blanketed prairies. Here and there a well worn range of low hills rises futilely, swept clean of loose soil and vegetation by the eternal winds. On these can be seen streaks of metal color where veins of various metals are exposed.

Blinkum is a thousand miles wide at its widest point and eleven thousand miles long. Its fabulous deposits of virgin copper and silver make it the richest asset of the human race. There are plenty of rich deposits of other metals, not only in virgin form, but also as ores; but it will be many centuries before all the known veins of pure copper and silver are exhausted—and none of the other metals are in enough demand to warrant the expense of transporting them out.

Unfortunately, the oil deposits are all on Winkum; and aside from the normal number of power plants for developing electricity for home and commercial consumption, there is no use for the stuff. On Blinkum it is needed for the power consumed in mining operations.

That is where it comes about that Elmer Smith could make his saving. He was O.T. at one of the many steam turbine plants. They burn oil. The oil has to come by air from Winkum. It is stored in underground tanks and mine tunnels, and runs into the fuel chambers at each power station through meters, so that fuel consumption for a plant is known, and fuel cost is charged to each plant.

And that is also how he could get away with it for a whole year without it being discovered. All the oil storage spaces are interconnected, and the air tankers get rid of their loads at one central place, the oil flowing through pipes to the various storage tanks. The yearly consumption of oil of just one plant wouldn't be noticed one way or another, since it is just about equal to the daily intake from the air tankers, and reserve storage space is distributed over so great an area. For plant 63 not to use its normal amount of fuel oil probably raised the oil level of all storage tanks a tenth of an inch.

Plant 63 was a turbo-electric outfit, completely automatic, and needing only one resident technician to make sure things kept going.

Two things keep the cycle steady. First is the oil fire which keeps changing the water to high pressure steam. Next is the eternal wind which cools off the water

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that changes the steam back to water after it has expended most of its energy driving the turbine.

Shut off the oil fire and generation of steam stops, ending the cycle. Shut off the wind and the cooling water for the condensers gets too hot, and doesn't change the spent steam back into water. That piles it up and builds up a back pressure that stops the turbine.

So both are absolutely necessary. The turbine can't possibly run without either. It's impossible. So all Elmer had done was shut off the fuel oil and said "Presto" and the turbine had kept running and generating power.

If he had cut fuel oil consumption maybe five percent he might have discovered some device to increase the efficiency of the oil fire.

Instead, he had used a normal four days amount of oil. Allowing him two days to change things over, and two days to change things back, that meant that for three hundred and sixty-one Earth days he hadn't used a drop of oil.

And he wouldn't tell anybody what he had done.

It was a little out of my line, even though I was the chief trouble shooter for IEI and accustomed to delving into the technical side of things when necessary, from space ships to juke boxes, IEI owning plenty of both. But then, the way it looked to me, it was a little out of anybody's line.

Two methods of getting at the root of the matter suggested themselves. I could try getting Elmer to tell me what he had done, or I could go directly to plant 63 first and try to solve things directly by straight detecting.

I'd done things like that many times. A bolt with new scratches on it, a peculiar curve on a Venturi meter chart, footprints in the dust on top of the boiler—all add up to something definite if you puzzle over them long enough. I could find out what changes Elmer had made that way, and I knew that plant 63 was being very carefully preserved until I either went there and looked over the clues or told the old man I didn't need to.

If it had been a crime or dereliction of duty or some other conventional thing, that's what I would have done first; but I had a sneaking hunch that even if I figured out everything Elmer had done I wouldn't be able to deduce the how or the why of it. The way I looked at it, only Elmer could tell me how he had run the plant without oil for a year.

Elmer, the briefs told me, was still in Chicago, Winkum, waiting for his discharge papers, salary, and that nice fat bonus. A phone call brought me the information that the next ship would leave at midnight—in seven hours.

I used up ten minutes of my office wire recorder, locked up my desk, and went home to pack.

Space travel had settled into a pretty monotonous thing after the first excitement of it had worn off and the scientists had found out what could be done and what could not. It would be a sort of crutch affair for a long time to come, because actual space ships

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capable of landing and taking off from planets were a little beyond the means of the average Sears Roebuck customer, costing a tidy thirty-odd billions of dollars each.

There were only four of them in existence, with three more under construction and due to be in operation in a couple more years. None of these four made the trip from one planet to another very often.

Instead, they spent their days dipping in and out of the atmosphere of the planet they were assigned to, picking up the ships that did go from planet to planet. These ships used for space travel weren't spaceships at all, but merely well built, pressurized airplanes designed so their wings could be completely withdrawn into humps above the ship body where stray debris in interplanetary space couldn't ruin them.

The mother ships, as the true spacecraft were called, were owned by the Earth government — the United Nations. The smaller craft that made the actual trips were owned by various corporations, including IEI. They would take off from airports like any other jet passenger job and rise into the stratosphere where they would land on the mother ship like they would on the old navy aircraft carriers. Then the mother ship would rise up away from the planet and set a course from which the planes could take off and coast to the planet they were destined for. Thus, the power for escape from a planet was supplied by the mother ship with its huge atom powered engines and acres of repulsor plates.

Just as the flying stovepipe engine has to be going so fast before it can begin to work, the Graham repulsor plate has to be so big before it can lift even its own weight free of the gravity of a planet. That's why the big mother ships had to be used to get ordinary-sized ships away and into space.

I took off from the Chicago airport at nine-thirty and landed in southern Arizona at the spaceport two hours later to be hustled over to the IEI ship by impatient attendants. Promptly at midnight, Central time, the ship began its three-mile glide which would leave huge clouds of half-burnt oil billowing out behind its jets.

It took to the air casually, and in seconds the ground was far below. The simulated ports brought a clear view of it all; but I knew that it was not a direct view, but merely a projection from a "master-eye" in the pilot's compartment.

It seemed no time at all before the unbelievably gigantic ovoid of the mother ship came into view ahead. It crept up slowly until it was below us like an unreal, vast expanse of landing field, suspended far above the waters of the Gulf of Mexico.

Other ships had already landed on it and were being pulled over to the sides and fastened down by pigmy tractors. There was just time to glimpse this before we, too, were on the flat back of the "mother" and being dragged while the wings of our ship pulled in.

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It seemed that already Earth belonged to some part of the universe far removed from us. Around us was a universe of metal field and robot-like machines, and insect-like things which were ships filled with people and mail and goods from factories, all going to Venus.

Now and then a vibration shook vaguely through the ship, as another and another of the ships settled on the broad back of the mother, until finally I knew there were at least fifty of them.

Now a new feeling penetrated the ship. It was a feeling of purpose—though what there was in it to give me that impression I had never been able to analyze. Down beneath the acres of flat metallic field, in the interior of the mother ship, men were touching buttons on remote control panels that directed the almost impossible forces which would carry us all away from Earth and into the vacuum of space.

No eye had ever seen that vacuum and kept its ability to see. Ultraviolet and soft x-rays were too plentiful for the sensitive human eye to withstand. But everything that the human eye could have seen was brought indirectly by the master eye in the pilot's compartment, screened and pared down so that it made sense.

It was safe now to unloosen safety belts and relax. Any accident that could happen now would be fatal anyway, so safety precautions were unnecessary. Around me other passengers were emitting sighs of relief and beginning to relieve strained muscles. A stewardess was coming down the aisle asking passengers if they wanted something to eat.

For eight hours to come we would live a life halfway between free space and Earth, while the mother ship pried herself free and set our course for Venus. Then once more would come a change. We wouldn't fasten our safety belts, but drop down the sponge rubber crash cases that would hold us for the rest of our journey.

We would be "on our own" then; one small ship alone in space, beyond the aid of the "mother" if anything happened. We were conscious of that now as we stretched and looked about and smiled at one another in friendly fashion and struck up conversations.

I knew that my own face reflected the same expression that was on every other face—one of quiet determination to make the most of the few hours of freedom left before the real trip began.

The stewardess, one new to me, gave me her professional smile and analyzed my emotions with her eyes while her lips asked me if I would like to eat something. I smiled back, sizing her up automatically. As an IEI employee she might some day come under my own professional scrutiny as trouble shooter.

I thought of the six years of college she had behind her, and the two years of internship in some mental hospital back on Earth that were necessary to qualify her for her job as a stewardess on a space run.

"My name is Mary Alice Dem-

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oth," she said, her smile still friendly and inscrutable. That made me realize that I had been staring at her.

"I'm sorry," I said, caught off balance and feeling a little flustered. Then I caught myself and said, "That's a very pretty name. I'll bet your mother was a poet."

"She was!" Mary Alice said, surprise flooding her face. She looked at me then with a new respect.

I remembered suddenly. Martha Demoth, the poet. She had been one of my father's favorites. How did it go?"

"Yon tree that holds the setting sun
In leafy gnarled embrace,
Protesting, grasping one by one
The fiery radiants of His face."

I spoke the words softly, almost reverently. How many times had my father spoken them at sundown? There had been a tree that did that—if you stood in the right spot. I looked beyond the stewardess and could see it in memory while Pop stood beside me, my small fist lost in his long fingers, his deep voice . . .

My eyes came back into focus in time to see the stewardess' eyes brighten with a film of tears. Then she took a step and was asking the passenger in the next seat if he would like something to eat.

"Yes, stewardess," I heard him say. His accent was familiar. I jerked my head to look at him.

My ears had told me before my eyes came to rest on him. He was a Venusian—one of their priests. He hadn't been there when I got on or I would certainly have noticed him, and in the hustle of takeoff I hadn't looked around too much at my fellow passengers.

I wondered briefly how his nine- or ten-foot frame would fit into the shock frame with its sponge rubber molded for a human. His indigo-colored face with its flat, apelike nose and human mouth, chin, and eyes was laced with fine wrinkles that extended even over his hairless head. His yellow robe of heavy monkscloth hung from his wide shoulders as from a coat-hanger.

It startled me to see him. I had never heard of a Venusian leaving Venus of his own free will. When he caught my eyes on him he nodded at me gravely, then dropped them to the book he was holding open in his hands. I took the hint and turned around again.

A large part of my success as a trouble shooter for IEI was due to my knowledge of Venusians and their ways. Their entire economy and society revolves around their priesthood and their religion. Their gods are geographical ones. To find one of their priests on a space ship leaving Earth was as unthinkable as to find a Catholic priest reciting High Mass over a pair of dice in a basement dive on the Seattle skidrow.

In other words, it was the firm conviction of the Venusian priesthood that a trip to Earth was tantamount to turning one's back on the gods of Venus—an act of blasphemy.

What secret, awful rites must have been performed to circumvent this danger! And what, I asked myself, could have been the

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reason for such an unheard of trip?

A vague uneasiness began to creep over me. I tried to dismiss it, but it grew on me.

Two other stewardesses wheeled the trays of food down the aisle and distributed them to the passengers. Mary Alice had had her look at each passenger, and it was the duty of these two to get their sizing up of potential psychopaths in too.

I ate my food while I tried to puzzle out the mystery of the priest. I knew, of course, of the stories of the four lifelike statues of stone in a secret Venusian temple, facing a mysterious, consuming Maxin-fire into which the high priest plunged sacrificial offerings of rare, perfect blooms from Venus' sacred gardens.

Those four statues were each a different color. There was a bright red one, representing the heat god who ruled the sunward side of Venus. There was a spotless white one, god of the ice continent. And there were two indigo-colored statues, supposed to be the gods of Blinkum and Nod.

As the story goes, these are the immortal bodies of four real gods, who could take possession of them and become as living Venusian men. And the high priest of the temple rules Venus as the representative and spokesman of these four gods.

Only some plan of the high priest could have made a trip to Earth by a priest possible. It might be nothing worth worrying about. I certainly had enough worries ahead of me with Elmer Smith and his stubbornness! But why hadn't the priest's trip been publicized? I made a habit of reading all the papers and listening to news broadcasts. I hadn't heard a thing about it.

When I finished my second cup of coffee and lit my after dinner cigarette I decided the best thing to do would be to turn around and ask him about it.

I inhaled two deep puffs to calm my nerves, then turned around, a casual, friendly smile on my face. The man in the seat behind me looked back at me, a smile forming on his own face. But it was a smoothshaven, pink face under a ten gallon hat, and had Texas stamped all over it.

"Howdy," he said in friendly greeting.

"H—hi," I muttered weakly, my eyes searching frantically for some sign of the Venusian. "Have you been sitting there all the time?" I glanced at his tray, the plates on it empty except for small scraps of food.

"Ever since we took off," he said with an expansive smile, pulling the wrapper off a long cigar and biting its tip. "My first trip—but I'm shore enjoyin' it. So far," he added with a worried crease between his clear, friendly eyes.

I turned back in my seat slowly, a deep sigh escaping my lips. For the first time in my life I was unsure of myself and my senses. It was an awful feeling.

Mary Alice Demoth was coming down the aisle from up forward. The way she kept her eyes down and her face expressionless I knew she was coming to talk with me.

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I was drinking in the sheen of her deep chestnut hair with its rich waves, the artistry of her nose and eyes and lips, the things about a woman that can make her something straight from Heaven. And yet I knew even as I watched her that it was not the sheen of her hair that held me in its growing spell, but the fiery radiants of a setting sun filtering through the boughs and leaves of a tree, long since cut down, that had always seemed to me to be as near to God as a mortal can get.

I think she felt my gaze on her. She looked up, and I felt her gaze, timid with the sensitiveness of hidden memories shared, yet bold with the courage of one who knows the course is right.

She started to sit down beside me. I saw her eyes flick to the seat behind me and widen in sudden surprise that was quickly masked. My own eyes flicked back and saw the Texan complacently reading a current novel. I knew, then, that Mary Alice had seen the Venusian priest when I had, and that he was no delusion.

"You have a nice name, too," Mary Alice said after she caught her breath. "Stanwoody. I looked it up on the passenger list."

"I see you ignore my last name," I said with a chuckle. "But you're right. I've always liked my name. It shortens to a simple, one-syllable man's name, Stan, and at the same time has a sort of tang of shaving lotion to it when you pronounce the whole thing. You see, my father was a poet himself, in a way. That is, he never wrote poetry, but read a lot of it and picked out poems that he memorized and incorporated into his living. That's how I happen to know your mother's poem. It was one of his favorites. There was even a tree—."

She was looking at me.

"What kind of work do you do?" she asked.

"I work for IEI too," I said. "I'm a sort of trouble shooter. Whenever anything goes wrong that starts costing IEI money, they send me out to make it stop costing money."

I liked her laugh.

"I remember where I'd heard your name before, now," she said. "Weren't you the one who cleared that stewardess two years ago when she was accused of stealing a passenger's wallet?"

"Yes," I answered. Then I glanced around with mock caution and added, "but only because it was my job. I still think she was guilty."

A frown appeared on her face. I sensed what it was about before she spoke.

"You're supposed to be something of an authority on Venus, aren't you, Stan?" she asked. When I nodded she went on. "Isn't there supposed to be some sort of superstition about a phantom Venusian priest who appears whenever there's going to be serious trouble?"

Memory shocked me like a bath of ice. I had completely forgotten that superstition. Or rather, I had not connected it with the mysterious Venusian in the seat behind

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me who had turned out to be a Texan.

I hesitated, wondering about the advisability of letting her know that I had seen him too. Deciding what was best to do was like flipping a coin, I thought, so I decided it would be better to tell the truth.

"Did you check the passenger list to see if there really is one aboard?" I asked.

It was her turn to feel the cold bath of shocked surprise. I could see it on her face and in her eyes.

"I—I'm not sure," she said slowly. "But it seems to me that the seat behind you is supposed to be empty."

I turned my head and looked back. The Texan was still there.

"Is that the seat assigned to you?" I asked him, grinning to let him know my inquisitiveness was not hostile.

"Why, no," he answered. "I'm farther back on the other side of the aisle. I moved up here to get away from a lonely female critter back there—."

He hesitated in embarrassment.

"Was it before or after the stewardess asked you if you would like something to eat?" I asked.

"Why, after," he said uneasily.

I sank back in my seat and looked at Mary Alice with triumph in my eyes.

"That Venusian *was* there, then," I said. "And he was no phantom. You saw him, and I saw him."

"But where did he go?" she asked.

"He must be around somewhere," I assured her. "He was no phantom, and he couldn't hide his nine- or ten-foot bulk for long. I'll bet if we look we'll find he changed his seat to get away from me. Maybe he recognized me. I'm known to most Venusians by now. He didn't want me asking him questions."

"I'll take a look," Mary Alice said.

I watched her as she walked slowly to the stern of the ship, then retrace her steps and continue on forward until she had disappeared into the forward crew compartment. She was gone for several minutes before she reappeared and came back to sink into the seat beside me, a troubled look on her face.

"He's not listed as a passenger either," she explained her delay. "I looked over the passenger list very carefully to make sure."

"Tell me what he looked like to you when you asked him if he would like to eat something, Mary Alice," I asked.

"Well," she hesitated, remembering. "He seemed shorter than other Venusians I've seen on my three trips to Venus as a stewardess. He was quite old, with wrinkles even on the top of his head. He wore a yellow monkscloth robe, and the way it hung made him look like a coat hanger with a head. That's all—oh yes, he was holding a book in his hands."

"That book!" I exclaimed. "Did you notice anything about it?"

"N—no," Mary Alice hesitated. "I just noticed it was a book. I would say it was an ordinary Earth book—probably American."

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"There's no question about it then," I said, nodding to emphasize my conviction. "Your description tallies with every detail I saw myself. And he isn't aboard now."

"No, he isn't aboard," Mary Alice said. "And yet—I can't quite bring myself to believe he *could* have been, even though you and I both saw him."

"You're looking at it backward," I pointed out. "We both saw him. Therefore he *is* aboard. That's more probable than your conclusion that, because you couldn't find him just now when you looked, he isn't aboard."

"But where could he hide?" Mary Alice asked wonderingly. "He's so big!"

I turned and looked at the Texan. He stared back, his big cigar smoking lazily, the blue streamer of smoke spiraling up and speeding near the ceiling toward the air-conditioning vent. He seemed to come to some conclusion in his thoughts. Sticking out his hand he said:

"My name's Sam Rayburn, Mr. Cripe. I recognized you from a picture I saw of you in the newspaper some time ago. Galveston is my home town."

"Glad to know you, Sam," I said, stretching my arm over the back of the seat to shake hands with him. With my other hand I signaled Mary Alice by squeezing her arm twice, quickly. "What seat number did you have? Miss Demoth just said she can change your seat officially—and it should be, in case there's an accident."

"I believe it was fourteen, sir," Sam Rayburn answered.

"I'll go up and change it right away," Mary Alice said, standing up and smiling innocently at the Texan. I watched briefly as she hurried up the aisle, and knew she had caught my meaning.

"My first trip away from Earth," Sam Rayburn was saying. "Yes sir. I've built my business up to where I have five stores now, and the Mrs. said if I wanted to go it was now or never." He settled himself, looked critically at the end of his cigar, flicked the ash luxuriously into the ash receptacle recessed into the wall, and went on. "I've always wondered what the Venusians look like up close, Mr. Cripe. I imagine you've seen lots of them."

"Oh," I shrugged, beginning to regret my interest in the man. "A few, more or less."

"Ha ha ha," he laughed goodnaturedly. "That's the vaguest reply I've ever run across. A few more or less. I'll have to remember that one and spring it on the Mrs. when I get back."

Mary Alice sank down beside me again, smiling at the Texan and saying, "It's all fixed, Mr. Rayburn. This is your seat now." I lifted my eyebrows at her. She shrugged her shoulders in reply.

"Let's take a walk, Mary Alice," I suggested casually. I wanted to get out of earshot of Sam Rayburn.

Five minutes later we were standing alone at the stern of the ship. There was a door leading into the tail where parachutes were stored.

"Do you have a key?" I asked.

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She unlocked the door with her key and pushed it open. Then she stepped aside and looked at me questioningly.

"Let's go in," I said. After we entered I closed the door behind us, switching on the overhead light. "I didn't expect to find the Venusian in here," I reassured her. "I just thought that we could talk in here without being overheard. What I've been thinking is that maybe Sam Rayburn is the Venusian priest."

"What!" Mary Alice exclaimed. "What makes you think that?"

"He has to be on board someplace," I said positively. "I can't picture a Venusian that isn't here being seen; but I can believe one that is here can change his appearance—by hypnotism or something. In other words, he could make everyone who looks at him believe they were seeing a *very* typical Earthman."

"If he can do that," Mary Alice said slowly. He could leave Venus as an Earthman, and come back as one, and even live indefinitely on Earth without anyone suspecting he was a Venusian."

I shook my head.

"That isn't what I was thinking," I said. "I was thinking about the superstition that whenever there is trouble a phantom Venusian priest is seen. I'm thinking maybe it could be more than a superstition."

"Sabotage?" Mary Alice asked, her eyes wide.

"Possibly," I said. I didn't tell her of the horrible possibility presenting itself—espionage. We had thought ourselves immune to that from the Venusians. Their indigo-colored skin might be colored. Their animal-like nose might be changed by surgery. Their total lack of hair might be changed with a wig and artificial eyebrows. But their normal height of eight to ten feet could never be masked by any disguise—or so we had thought.

To clinch our feeling of safety from espionage, the Venusian himself had built up the belief that leaving Venus even for a visit to Earth was tantamount to losing his soul.

Yet, Mary Alice and I had seen a Venusian priest sitting in the seat behind mine. I had heard his voice. It was no delusion. It was real. He must still be on board, but he couldn't be found. That was an absurdity—to hide his enormous body; unless he could do what certain Hindu adepts have been known to do; hypnotize those around him, including Mary Alice and I, so that we could look right at him and not see him—or look at him and see an ordinary Earth human.

If that could be done here, it could be done on Earth and on Venus itself. There could be some plan of sabotage and espionage already existing, so well developed that in the near future we might wake up to find the Venusians in control, and ourselves the underdog race.

It was the fact that it could be done, I saw, that was important. It created a point of vulnerability in the position of the human race

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It was necessary that I get back to Earth at once and present what I knew to be facts to the proper authorities. They could devise means to get around hypnotism, such as remote inspection through television hookups, or routine photographing of crowds, that would bring out actual forms and uncover any Venusians.

The problem of Elmer Smith and his two-million four-hundred-thousand-dollar bonus for a year's work would have to wait.

"Look, Mary Alice," I said in sudden decision. "I have the authority to turn this ship back to Earth. There isn't time to tell you the reasons. In fact, even if there were time, I don't think I want to expose you to the danger you would be in if you knew what I suspect. So when we leave this room, we will go forward to the pilot compartment casually, as though nothing was on our minds. Once there, I will present my credentials and give the pilot his orders."

She was standing very close to me, staring up at me, her eyes wide with surprise at my words and tone of voice. Without conscious thought my arms circled her and I kissed her.

We separated. She stood there, a dazed, starry light in her eyes. I wanted to kiss her again.

"Let's go," I said gruffly.

She opened the door and stepped out into the main section of the ship. I followed her.

Sam Rayburn, the Texan, was standing there crowding the aisle. In his hand was a paper cup half filled with water. His calm eyes blinked at me owlishly, then he drained the cup with one gulp and dropped it in the waste receptacle.

How long had he been there? He was tall—six and a half feet at least—and his ten gallon hat with its smooth dome . . .

I grinned at him and pushed past him after Mary Alice. What if he was a Venusian! The instructions I was going to radio back to Earth would give us a reception that would trap him neatly.

I felt his eyes resting on my back all the way forward.

The pilot room of a space ship is an awe-inspiring thing. Instead of a glass dome bringing the spectacle of the starry heavens there is a huge panel consisting of nothing but the frosted glass panes of television tubes. Each of these is connected to its own individual "eye." The "eye" can be centered on some heavenly object and will stay there, held by robot control. The master calculator superimposes the coordinates of the object at the bottom of the screen image, picking that data up from the mechanism of the "eye."

To me, the circuits in between the "eye" and the screen are the real wonder. For example, the circuit whose "eye" is turned directly to the sun; a twist of the dial will subdue the fiery orb until it is a pale disk, while its corona will brighten to any degree and come out sharp and clear. That's the way it appeared in one of the squares of the panel as Mary Alice and I entered the pilot compartment.

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Luna also rested in its square; but Earth, lying underneath the mother ship, was not present. Venus was in her square, however, and magnified to the size of a large orange.

I recognized the pilot, Rus Tryon. The two co-pilots were strangers to me. The other two stewardesses I had already seen when they distributed our meal.

The clock on the instrument panel showed five hours and seven minutes to launching time. "Only we won't be casting free," I thought. "The mother will have to set a course to drop us in a trajectory that will bring us back to the field where we took off."

"Hello, Rus," I said, returning his grin of welcome. The grin on his face changing to a smile, his eyes went past me then, as if welcoming someone else. I turned my head to see who he was looking at.

Sam Rayburn stood behind me, an apologetic look on his face.

"Sorry if I'm butting in, Mr. Cripe," he said. "My nephew said if I was ever on one of these space ships to be sure and see the pilot room. I thought, 'It's now or never,' when I saw you and the stewardess coming up here, so I tagged along."

He pulled a cellophane wrapped cigar out of his vest pocket, then stuck it back in, uncomfortably. I realized that all the suspicion and hostility I had felt on seeing him here was showing on my face. The others, all except Mary Alice, were looking at me queerly. I looked at her and saw the fear and tenseness in her eyes. I looked back at Sam Rayburn and decided to match his mood.

"Well, now," I said, almost in a Texan drawl. "There's no harm done that I can see. Passengers aren't allowed up here, but now that you're here you might as well take a good look."

I had gotten control of myself. I could smile at him.

"That's moughty nice of you, Mr. Cripe," Sam Rayburn said. The respect in his voice made me feel like I owned the whole IEI outfit. "Moughty."

It was hard—almost impossible—at that moment, to believe him other than what he seemed to be. I felt my fears receding from me. I was almost inclined to believe as Mary Alice had wanted to that the momentary glimpse of the Venusian priest had itself been an illusion or a delusion, rather than reality.

"This is the screen panel my nephew told me about!" Sam Rayburn said, fixing his eyes on it and stepping up so he stood beside me. His shoulder was even with my eyes. The top of his spotless gray hat would have scraped the ceiling if he had not been slightly stooped. There was an odor of stale cigar smoke about him.

His hand reached into his vest pocket again and brought out the cellophane wrapped cigar. He twisted it clumsily in his thick fingers while his eyes gazed, awestruck, at the image of the sun with its lazily drifting corona streamers.

My eyes dropped to the cigar. There was a reflection of the tele-

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vision panel on its glistening surface . . .

Once in my early teens I had dived too deeply in a murky lake. Short of breath, I had looked about me to see which way was up so that I could shoot to the surface and breathe. The clouded waters had been the same in all directions. I had become panicky, and, terror stricken, had struck out in the first direction my body would take. An instant later my hands had sunk in the ooze of the lake bottom and, with a glad feeling inside me, I had reversed myself and used my feet to give me speed to reach the surface.

I felt that way now. A weight was pressing in around me. It was hot and cloying. My head was turning this way and that in a frenzy of suffocation. There was no feeling of "up" with which my sense of balance could orient itself. For a terrible moment I was living again the nightmare of that experience at the bottom of the lake. Then my consciousness rushed to the present and I knew from long experience what caused it.

Before I opened my eyes I knew that I was encased in the sponge rubber shock case, and that the ship was in open space on its own.

A picture of a great-aunt in an old album I had seen many times when I was little rose in my mind, vivid in its tinny colors and unreality and outlandish costume. It washed away in a spiral of blackness to be replaced by the realization that the air I was breathing was opiated. It was always opiated during actual space flight in the passenger section.

I wondered drowsily how much longer it would be before we reached—Venus? The effort to recall where I was going brought back everything with a rush.

We were in space! Frantically I tried to recall what had happened. I could remember clearly up to the moment Sam Rayburn was standing beside me looking at the television panel. From there on it was a blank. I had been looking at the wrapper on his cigar . . .

I groaned and shook my head to clear my thoughts. I had been going to return the ship to Earth and trap a Venusian priest I had thought was hiding on it somewhere. Too late for that now. The rockets of the ship didn't have the power to turn the ship about and return it to Earth. It would have to continue on to Venus.

Mary Alice! Memory of her came with a feeling of warmth and contentment. It was replaced by worry. She knew my suspicions. The Venusian would have had to take care of her too in some way. There was no question but what I had been hypnotized. Had the same thing been done to her?

A new thought rose to plague me. Did the Venusian know my full suspicions? If not, then when this trip was over I could still start things going to uncover everything going on. But if he did suspect, if he knew that I had guessed the full implications of his presence on board . . .

I shoved the thought from me and unfastened the shock case. I

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had to find out what had happened to Mary Alice before I did anything else.

Soft music was playing over the loudspeaker. The make-believe porthole was showing a movie that was having its premiere back on Earth.

A restful green light pervaded everything, giving just enough light to make things out. My drugged legs could hardly move. My arms felt leaden. I was fighting the lassitude that was trying to make me let things ride and go back to sleep.

The shock case rose to the ceiling silently. I forced myself upward, and felt my body leave the seat. I bumped gently against the shock cushion and struck out for the center of the arched ceiling where I knew a longitudinal rod was located.

My hand wrapped around it and I started pulling myself forward, hand over hand, while my weightless body dangled along. A child could have carried me along easily. I grimaced and groaned with the effort of overcoming the sluggishness of my drugged muscles.

People were watching me curiously. No doubt several of them would press the alarm button in their shock cushions. So much the better. By the time I reached the forward end of the passenger section a stewardess would be opening the door with her gas mask on to see what was wrong.

I was being foolhardy, I knew. A sudden burst from the robot-triggered rockets to avoid a rock fragment would send me smashing with bone-breaking force against things.

And, not knowing anything that had happened, I might find the pilot section taken over by the Venusian. I didn't see how else he could have circumvented my plan to return the ship to Earth. Still, I had been in my own seat. The other passengers staring at me with concern on their faces now were evidently not too alarmed. I must have, somehow, walked under my own power to my seat before the launching took place.

The pilot room door was just a few feet away now. In another few seconds I could go through it—if it wasn't locked. A red light flashed just above it suddenly. It dimmed and flashed again.

I groaned in defeat. That red light was the signal that we were nearing Venus. It would flash fifteen times before the first decelerating rocket blast.

Desperately I looked around. There was a vacant seat by the pilot room door. I pulled myself the last few feet, with the ominous red light blinking away the seconds, and pushed myself downward.

I pressed the button that brought the shock cushion down to cover me and protect me from burst of deceleration. I was none too soon. Just as I felt it lock in place the red light brightened and an unseen force gripped me, pushing me forward.

It lasted ten seconds, then was gone. My exertion had thrown off some of the effects of the opiated

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air. I could feel the blood pounding in my temples, the painful pressure of my heart against my ribs.

I breathed deeply, feeling the soporific effects of the air creep into my muscles. I steeled myself for the second blast which I knew was coming.

It came. The third, and fourth, and fifth. Then came the stomach dislocating bounces as the ship tore into the first streamers of atmosphere, more tenuous than the vacuum in a lightglobe, yet strong enough to tear loose any punctured shell plate and wreck the ship at the speed we were going.

The soft music over the loudspeaker continued without pause. The figures in the movie playing on the imitation portholes were leaning casually on a bar, sipping drinks from wide lipped glasses, laughably incongruous in a reality where forces were so unpredictable and violent.

A subsensual vibration crept through the sponge rubber. It was from the wings being slowly telescoped out from their hump. They would come out only a little way—just enough to keep us bouncing up away from denser atmosphere until our speed had diminished to only two or three thousand miles an hour.

I had time for thought now. From here on it would be suicide to leave the protection of my seat.

It was obvious that the hypnotic spell I had been under had not been broken until it would be too late for me to reach the pilot compartment. I had been under it all during the long trip.

Whatever had happened in the pilot room, I wouldn't be able to find out until we had landed. Whatever had happened to Mary Alice, there was nothing I could do now.

I thought of Elmer Smith and the mystery of how he could run a power plant for a year without fuel. That mystery, important as it was, would have to take second place to the present one. The vague thought that there might be a connection crept into my mind. I laughed at it.

By an absurd stretch of imagination I might think it possible that the Venusian was on board to prevent me from investigating Elmer; but then why had I been so neatly prevented from turning the ship back to Earth?

No. It was mere coincidence that I was on the same ship as the Venusian. If I had been an ordinary citizen instead of an employee of IEI in a position to do a little string-pulling I would have had to wait for red tape clearance before getting on the ship.

The Venusian couldn't have known I would be on the ship for the very obvious reason that I hadn't known I would be myself until a few hours before it was to depart.

What was going to happen? I couldn't believe the Venusian priest naive enough to believe he could get away with things if the ship landed at the regular airport on Winkum—unless there were more hypnosis or something to come that would get me out of

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the running until he could escape into the native quarters.

Maybe he had hoped I would be caught when the ship decelerated. The memory of my close call brought sweat to my forehead. I had had fifteen seconds to get into the protection of a shock cushion —and hadn't had a second to spare. If there had been no empty seats within a few feet I would be a smashed corpse lying against the forward bulkhead instead of a still living trouble shooter for IEI.

It could be that the Venusian priest's plans were going wrong-at every turn—but I didn't think so. They could have gone better for him. I could be dead and no one to suspect it was clever murder. But deep down inside of me I felt that it didn't matter one way or the other in the schemes of the crafty priest.

I looked at the television porthole and got my first hint that our landing might not be what it should be. By this time—from the feel of the plane its jet motors were on—it should be switched to a view of Venus so that the passengers could see its surface from the air. Instead, the movies were still running.

I was still looking at it when the first jar came. It was an instantaneous thump followed by a feeling of being suspended in gravityless space. That lasted several seconds. Then came a crash and a deceleration that pressed my head and body well into the thick sponge rubber shock cushion. I seemed to hold there eternally before I sprang back.

My sense of balance was with me now, and it told me the ship was standing almost on its nose. The next moment, with a slow deliberateness in its motion, it settled down to an almost even keel. At the same time the lights went out and the television went dead.

I unhooked the shock cushion and pushed it upward. Ignoring the sounds of alarm around me I reached in the total blackness for the knob of the door to the pilot compartment.

The door swung open at my touch. A blast of frigid air struck me, freezing the perspiration on my face. Blinking my eyes I took in the horror that open door revealed.

The television panel that had formed a simulated window at the very front of the pilot compartment was shoved aside in somewhat the manner of a clumsily opened lid of a can of beans. An eerie, blue-white light pervaded everything, revealing a ghostly vista of white shapes.

The white shapes, I slowly realized, were distant, icy mountains. We were wrecked on the ice continent of Venus!

A groan jerked my thoughts back to my surroundings. I stepped inside the pilot compartment and closed the door. I could see; but the tricky light made me nearsighted. It was almost a phosphorescence.

"Mary Alice?" I called anxiously.

"Here I am, Stan," her voice answered in front of me to my right.

With a cry of gladness I was at

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her side, freeing her from her shock seat. Then we were both working on the others. We worked against time. The numbing cold was seeping into us, slowing our movements, numbing our fingers.

The other two stewardesses came free; Rus Tryon, the pilot, came next. Then—that was all. The two co-pilots were dead. They had been smashed by the caved-in front of the ship.

Rus Tryon took over.

"Emergency routine," he said crisply. "Stewardesses instruct passengers to remain in their shock seats. Stan, see if you can determine how permanent and safe our position is. We might be perched on something and in danger of another fall. Pilot—that's me—switch over to emergency batteries under floor of passenger section."

It was all important. I climbed over the twisted wreckage to the gaping hole at the nose of the ship. I was shivering violently. My clothes, damp from perspiration, were getting stiff. My breath was raw and made clouds of white steam. An errant memory from boyhood cautioned me against touching my skin against bare metal.

The surface of the ice we were on was less than six feet below. Emboldened by that knowledge, I hooked my elbow on the jagged edge of the opening and leaned out to get a better view.

To the left and ahead of me was a flat plain of dead white. Beyond rose enormous piles of white that tumbled and cracked here and there even as I watched. These appeared to be many miles distant. To the right of me the tableland extended what seemed a quarter of a mile and ended abruptly. Just above where it ended, seeming more like the stroke of a brush than reality, was a fine line of gray. Its upper edge was sharp and had an almost imperceptible curvature. It was the ocean!

The ocean! The true hopelessness of our position sank in then. The shoreline of the ice continent was nothing but a place where huge chunks of glacier ice broke off, undermined below the waterline by the ocean. The chances were very remote that we could pass that barrier and reach the ocean without being crushed. And once on the ocean—. It would be, roughly, three thousand miles to land. Three thousand miles of storms and high waves and treacherous currents that would suck us between the land continents and carry us to the hot side of Venus instead of tossing us up on shore where we could make our way to civilization.

What had happened that had caused us to crack up so far off our course? Even as I framed the question in my mind the answer came to me with blinding clarity. That Venusian priest! And this was the sacred territory of the Ice God.

Before the priest could advance into the higher circle of priesthood he would have to make his pilgrimage to the ice continent and get back safely.

Well, I thought grimly, that indigo madman had arrived. But he would stand no more chance of

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getting back than we had.

I pulled myself back from the ragged opening in the ship and picked my way over the wreckage to the door to the passenger section of the ship. When I opened the door I was greeted with warmth and good electric light. Rus Tryon had gotten the emergency batteries to working. A quick glance told me that the passengers were all obediently remaining in their shock seats.

"How do things look outside, Stan?" Rus asked cheerfully, looking up from where he was bent over an opening in the floor. The dull black of batteries glistened from the depths.

"All right for the moment," I said, shrugging.

There was no use alarming the passengers. In my own mind I knew how hopeless our situation was. We were close to the edge of the ice continent. Today, tomorrow, next week, or next year the part we were on would break off with a deafening roar and plunge into the ocean—if we waited. If we found some way to slide the wrecked plane to the ocean and try to launch it, in all probability our added weight would precipitate the breaking off of the present shoreline, so that the plane would be ground to bits by the thousand-ton chunks of ice.

Radio? Assuming a transmitter was left whole out of the wreckage of the pilot room, it was extremely doubtful that it could reach, and even if it did—I thought of the ill-fated exploring party that had tried to reach the ice continent by plane six years before. We were as good as dead and I knew it. But I shrugged my shoulders and grinned back at Rus cheerfully.

Mary Alice and the other two stewardesses were back in the stern storage room. I stuck my hands in my pockets and started down the aisle to join them.

Sam Rayburn, his Texas eyes calm as a placid cow, his spotless ten gallon hat still undented, gave me a cheerful questioning look from the prison of his shock seat.

In the back of my mind I had concluded he was the Venusian. In the back of my mind I had concluded that the moment the ship crashed he had given up his hypnotic masquerade and darted off into the whiteness of the ice continent to commune with his gods —and no doubt freeze to death.

Those conclusions had been definite and incontrovertible. I would sooner have lain awake nights worrying about whether IEI was too broke to pay me my salary than to have doubted them.

To see him there, the same old Sam, slightly uncomfortable in an apologetic sort of way in the too-small shock prison, his Texas friendliness still serene and unshaken, did something to my mind and my knees.

Without looking at Sam or anyone else, I hurried down the aisle to the storage room.

"To hell with things," I thought. And I knew I was nearer cracking than I had ever been before in my life.

Mary Alice greeted me with a cheery smile. I joined in on taking

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inventory of things. I hadn't paid attention to the names of the other two stewardesses when she had introduced me to them at the start of the trip, but now I learned in the general conversation that they were Jo and Ann. They were nice girls. The four of us were having a nice time working together until the icequake shook the ship.

I found myself running and stumbling up the aisle toward the pilot compartment and realized I was very close to cracking. I slowed down and ventured a "Don't worry, folks. Everything will be all right."

I found Rus Tryon peering through the jagged hole in the front of the ship when I closed the door behind me.

"See any cracks in the ice?" I asked casually, joining him.

"Nope," he answered.

"What happened that we crashed this far off our course?" I asked. "I haven't gotten that straight yet."

He turned and looked at me then. In the phosphorescent light his face looked pasty white and his eyes looked bloodshot and pink.

The second icequake began just as he opened his mouth to tell me. It was a violent shudder. It caught Rus off balance. He fell out of the ship, landing on his shoulders on the ice.

I could feel the sickening swoop of things as I jumped out to help him. It was slow, interminable. It was still swooping in the same direction as we climbed back in the ship together, helping each other.

We got in and grabbed hold of whatever we could and turned to watch the slow influx of dark gray water coming toward us over the ice. I found myself wondering why the ship didn't slide.

The water came almost to the ship and then receded, leaving the ice translucent where it had been. The swooping feeling was reversed now. Rus and I watched the water go away without breathing.

I knew what had happened—was happening. The ocean sometimes undermined the shore of the ice continent quite a way in. When our ship had crash-landed it had jarred the whole area, and no doubt started cracks. The whole area was breaking away in one big chunk.

It had broken away and dipped deep. The ocean water had almost come in over us. There was a chance it would now, on this backswing.

"Rus," I said quickly, "Will this ship float in the shape it's in?"

"I think so," he answered. "The passenger section is gas tight and has its own air replenishers that are good for another two weeks."

"Then get back in there quick," I said. "There's a chance the water will wash us off on this rockback."

"What good can you do out here if it does?" he objected.

"There isn't time to argue that," I ordered. "Get in there."

We could see the water coming in from the other direction now. It seemed to be coming faster than before. Rus studied it broodingly several seconds, then left me.

I watched the door close behind him, then I was alone. I was shiver-

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ing. I knew the cold was my greatest danger, and I was beginning to doubt the wisdom of my hasty decision.

But if the ship got knocked off the ice into the water, and floated in such a way that the doors couldn't be opened without flooding the whole ship, there had to be someone out here to tell them about it inside.

The water was coming in, falling over itself in some spots, advancing with just a ripple of determination in others, but coming swiftly all along its front. Across the gray water a hundred yards rose a clean, icy cliff. It rose maybe a hundred feet, straight up. That was where the chunk we were on had broken off.

I looked up at the sharp line of the cliff edge. As I looked I thought I saw a dark splotch appear there. I squinted my eyes, cursing the tricky light, trying to be sure. Was it the Venusian?

Rus hadn't had a chance to tell me what had happened to make us land on the ice continent. Maybe now I would never know.

Suddenly there was a jar that nearly shook me loose from the ship. Even as I felt it I knew its cause. On the backrock the berg had bumped against the under side of the ice shelf. Unless that jar broke up the berg we were safe—for a time.

I looked up at the cliff edge again. Whatever I had seen was gone now—if I had seen anything. I continued to stare at it while my thoughts told me in scholarly fashion what would happen from here on.

We were on a huge iceberg. Its area, from what I could see, was two or three hundred acres. It was low in the water which could mean several things. It could mean there wasn't much thickness to it, which was probably true. But it could also mean the water was near freezing—if my hazy memory of those things was accurate.

The ocean of Venus is fresh water. That I knew. All the minerals get washed over to the sunward side.

The currents would carry the iceberg toward the land continents; but before we got there it would probably melt. In any event it would break up when we hit the storms.

Maybe. Occasional icebergs were seen in the swift waters between the three land continents, proving that some bergs survived the trip.

We had a chance now, though. That thought kept repeating itself in my mind. We had a chance. A miracle had happened. We were free of the ice continent and still alive. We had a week or two to work for our final salvation.

We could get a radio transmitter working and get help. Helicopters could follow our beam and take us off, a few at a time.

With a final glance at the edge of the cliff which was now slowly retreating, I climbed over the debris, keeping my eyes away from the two dead co-pilots in their shock seats, and went to the door to the passenger section of the ship.

The door didn't move under my pushing fingers. Panic gripped at

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my throat and I realized again how close I was to cracking. I was very cold.

I rattled the knob, then pounded on the door panel with my fist. Part of my shivering now wasn't from the cold.

I had faced the possibility of being killed a moment before, with perfect calmness. I had sent Rus inside knowing that it was quite probable the waters would rush in on the backswing and wash me away, freezing me to death in moments.

Now, with hope alive, the thought of freezing to death because of a locked door brought crawling horror to the surface of my mind.

Why was it locked? Why didn't someone open it and let me in?

The door moved away from my pounding fists. With a sob of relief, and with no thought about what might be on the other side, I lunged through it.

There was an instantaneous, photographic impression of Sam Rayburn standing in front of me. The expression on his face was changing from one of calm to one of surprise. There was something in his hand that looked like a gun; but I was past it and hurtling into his body.

I couldn't have stopped. At that moment I was the abject coward, the craven yellowbelly. The locked door had been too much. I had given way. I had broken.

Sam Rayburn was off balance when I struck him. He didn't have time to step back and recover. My momentum toppled him.

My eyes fixed on his face and stared at the ludicrous expression on it in fascination. I was seeing things in slow motion. I saw his fingers relax their grip on the gun, and saw it begin to swing slowly on his trigger finger.

I saw his spotless ten gallon hat dent on the metal hand hold of a seat back.

Then all my terror switched its direction. Sam epitomized everything that had happened. I was on him before he landed on his back on the floor. My fists were landing on his chin, his nose, and his eyes.

When I stopped it was because my frenzied mind could command my muscles no longer. I sat there on Sam's chest my breath coming in deep sobs—only it wasn't Sam.

I could hear the lazy slap of waves against the edges of the iceberg in the silence of that eternal moment while my thoughts adjusted themselves to the fact that it was the Venusian priest I was sitting on.

"So I was right!" I finally said to myself, my old confidence that had been gone so long rushing back into my mind.

Then Sam Rayburn was hurrying down the aisle toward me and I became a bewildered little boy.

He stepped past me, the smell of stale cigar smoke going with him. I heard the door slam shut like a pistol shot in the closed room. The next moment his raspy breath was on my neck and I felt myself lifted up by strong arms.

He paused with me in his arms, then jerked violently. After that he carried me down the aisle and set

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me down in the nearest empty seat. I learned later that that jerk had been him kicking the Venusian on the jaw to make sure he stayed out.

I stayed where he put me. Pretty soon I felt soft arms around me and heard Mary Alice's voice crooning soft words in my ears—words filled with reassurance and comfort and all the things a woman can put into her voice when she wants to.

I was just beginning to enjoy that when somebody tipped my head up and I felt a hot spoon against my lips. I opened my mouth and my eyes at the same time, tasted the hot vegetable soup in my mouth and saw the smiling face of Ann looking down at me past the halo of Mary Alice's rumpled hair.

My eyes looked forward and I saw Sam Rayburn and Rus Tryon bent over the Venusian, who was on his side. Sam was fastening the indigo-colored wrists together with a belt off somebody's trousers.

I looked up at Ann again and grinned a little before I opened my mouth to let her know I wanted some more soup. I liked the way my head was resting on Mary Alice's shoulder.

I shouldn't have done that. I shouldn't have let myself be lulled into a feeling of security. At that moment I held all the cards. I should have been busy sorting them over, reading them, planning the future.

Through a bit of phenomenal luck I had done something that should have been impossible. The Venusian had not counted on my turning coward and losing control of myself. He had not expected me to come in like a charging bull. He had expected me to walk quietly into his trap.

Even so it had been the hard surface of the metal hand hold on the seat that had knocked him out. Maybe my fists would have done so anyway, but he was out when he reached the floor. I'll never know.

But I should have been considering what I knew of Venusian religion and superstition and taking them into account. I should have been giving orders.

I had my moment right then—and muffed it. I drank hot soup and basked in the luxury of a soft shoulder to rest against. I soaked in the hero worship that oozed out of Ann's eyes, and knew that she thought it was my masterful abilities as trouble shooter that had made me see in one infallible glance what the situation was when the door opened, and enabled me to take the Venusian by surprise and overcome him. I had a warm feeling at the thought that probably Mary Alice had reached the same conclusion. I wanted her to. I didn't want anyone ever to suspect that it was not a brave man who charged through that door, but a craven coward with panic biting at his heels.

I felt that from then on everything would be duck soup. We would get a transmitter working and make contact with Winkum. We'd have a nice, lazy trip until the helicopters came to pick us

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up. And in a week at the most we would be safe. I would be having dinner with Mary Alice at the Rathskeller in Chicago, Winkum, and be getting at the root of the problem of Elmer Smith and his system of running a power plant with no fuel.

No one was to blame for what happened but myself. No one on the ship except myself knew anything much about the Venusians. And Venusians were the farthest thing from my mind right then.

I was gulping hot soup and dreaming of a home with a fireplace, and me lolling in an easy chair with Mary Alice holding my head nestling in the curve of her neck. Maybe, once I got married, the old man would give me a desk job.

It was three days, Earth time, before we reached the storm belt. We made good use of those three days. The wings of the plane were buckled and damaged beyond repair, but fortunately the fuel lines to the jets hadn't broken. We had several thousand gallons of low octane fuel. Pieces of the wing covering cut into disks with tinsnips and slightly dished at the edges to hold oil made good fires in the open, with pieces of shirts and other cloth as wicks.

Except for sleeping we all moved out onto the ice where we could watch the dark ocean waves come in and enjoy the fresh air.

There was no way of estimating our speed. The ceiling of the sky was above us, impenetrable. Sometimes it churned, but most of the time it just hung there. We knew the current was carrying us toward the land belt and that the wind was going that way too. But there was nothing to use to gauge our speed.

Rus spent most of his time salvaging parts from the wrecked front of the ship. He thought he might be able to build a transmitter and receiver so we could contact somebody and let them know we were alive.

We transferred the Venusian priest to one of the seats after he regained consciousness and dropped the shock cushion down to hold him, locking it in position the same as was done for passengers who go off their nut with space madness.

He accepted the food the stewardesses fed him without trouble. Except when he closed his eyes and slept, he watched what went on around him without expression. The passengers spent a lot of time looking at him. They had never seen a real live Venusian up close. I didn't blame them for their fascination at seeing one.

His skin was a deep indigo color. There wasn't a hair on him anywhere. Hair was completely unheard of on Venus until the first Earth human arrived there.

If you had cut a two-inch hole in a piece of cardboard and covered his face so only his nose showed you would have sworn you were looking at the nose of a great ape or a gorilla. If you had covered his nose with a two-inch disk of cardboard and looked at the rest of his face you would have thought him a real human being with some-

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thing discoloring his face and all his hair fallen out. That's the way all Venusians look. The priest was no exception, except that he was so old his skin was wrinkled with millions of fine creases.

Sam Rayburn came up with a good idea the second day, Earth time. With a file and a hacksaw from the toolbox he fashioned a couple of heavy fish hooks from brass wire. In his quiet, good natured way he organized a crew and went about the job of fishing like it was something he did every day. He used silk-covered fine wire from a transformer for the line. And with the tinsnips he fashioned half soles for shoes out of some grill work and wired them onto his shoes and those of his crew so they wouldn't be in any danger of sliding off the ice into the water. He used bacon for bait, pointing out that if it didn't catch something it would still be edible.

After he got going he was a busy man. All sorts of queer-looking fish were lurking around the edges of our iceberg. They snapped at the bacon as if they were starved and had never heard of hooks, which they hadn't.

In three hours Sam had a pile of fish that must have weighed half a ton. He finally lost his second hook to some fish big enough to break the wire line. When that happened he took off his ten gallon hat and scratched his head thoughtfully while he looked at the pile of fish.

"Well," he said. "I guess that's enough anyway. By the time we eat our way through that pile of fish we won't want to hear the word for the rest of our lives."

There was only one thing all the fish had in common. Just as hair was unknown to Venusians, none of the fish had scales. All of them had leathery hides like sharks. They ranged in size from a pound to around fifteen pounds. The bigger ones had broken the line and gotten away. Some of them in the pile looked almost like bass. Some were shaped like sharks and had sharp, pointed teeth.

I was beginning to like Sam. He took everything as it came, with his slow, easy smile. To look at him you would think it was all part of the vacation he had been looking forward to all the years he had been building up his stores in Galveston.

I had figured out everything that had happened. Rus swore that he had believed himself right on the course up to the minute the ship had crashed into the ice. I believed him.

The Venusian, I was convinced, had chosen Sam Rayburn as his "thought mold." Sam was a striking figure. Everybody took a good look at him when they saw him, and his image was strong in their minds. The Venusian priest was a master of hypnotism. Whenever anyone looked at him he hypnotized them and blocked off their consciousness of him and substituted the memory of Sam in its place. He had only slipped for that one minute when both Mary Alice and I had seen him as he really was.

In that way he was able to sit

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right behind me all the time. It had been the Venusian who had entered the pilot compartment with Mary Alice and me. He had put me into a hypnotic stupor and sent me back to my seat. Also he had taken over the mind of Rus Tryon, the pilot, and through him had directed the ship to the ice continent.

Mary Alice had been puzzled and confused when I had casually said I was tired and thought I would take a nap, and had left the pilot room without ordering Rus to stop the launching of the ship from the mother carrier. But she hadn't suspected I was hypnotized. She had not dared to do anything on her own hook.

She had come back to my seat once before launching time and asked me why I had changed my mind and I had said soothingly, "Take it easy, honey. I was all wet. Everything's all right."

It made me break out in a cold sweat when I thought how pliable our minds were, and how skillfully the Venusian priest had molded our thoughts.

But I was already making plans that would expose how much of this sort of thing was going on. Television eyes placed at the entrances of space ships when passengers were getting on, with the receiving screens far away from the possibility of a Venusian hypnotising the watchers would reveal any Venusian boarding a ship. When one entered a ship, remote control anesthetizers placed in the ventilation system of the ship could put everyone on board to sleep while police entered and captured the unconscious alien.

It would all be very simple. Only no one had ever thought of the possibility of the Venusians being able to use their gifts of hypnosis to go to the Earth undetected. No system of precautions had been thought of for that reason.

We were all becoming one big happy family as time wore on. The few passengers who were complaining or bitter about the hardships were kidded out of it by the many who recognized the fact that we were lucky to be alive.

Soon everyone began to talk about the storm area we would have to pass through before reaching land. Anxious eyes studied the slow recession of the shore line of the iceberg as it melted, and tried to estimate whether it would hold together or not.

Plans were discussed and discarded. Sam Rayburn himself suggested that we drive rods into the ice and secure the ship so that it wouldn't slide off the iceberg if it rolled too much in the increasing seas. But it was Rus Tryon who pointed out that in that case if the berg broke in two and the part where the ship rested were to go under water it would be fatal for us.

I entered these discussions, but in the back of my mind was a desire to talk to the Venusian priest and see what I could get out of him. I spoke about my desire to Rus. He thought it over and came up with a honey of an idea.

"Why not create a conviction in

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the priest's mind that there isn't any hope for us?" he suggested. "We could talk about some break in the ship's shell and create the idea that as soon as the ice breaks up we'll sink. Maybe he would boast a little if he became convinced we wouldn't live to tell about it."

It was easy to do that. A lot of the time the passengers were all out on the ice looking ahead to where they could see the black swirlings of raging storms.

We chose such a time to be by ourselves back by the storage room, and put on a good, convincing act. We kept our voices low, but we both knew how good Venusian ears are, and felt sure the priest heard our every word.

After we had worried about a mythical crack in the shell of the ship under the passenger section and expressed the belief to each other that we didn't stand the chance of a snowball in the Mojave desert in July, we spent a little time telling each other we must keep the sad news from the passengers to prevent panic.

Then, wearing very sad expressions, we left the ship. I waited until the next day, Earth time, to have my talk with the priest. I figured that would give him time enough to gloat about the success of his attempt to destroy us all, and put him in the mood to brag about it. Maybe then I could find out how many of the strange disappearances of space ships in the past had been the work of Venusians, and how elaborate and extensive the plans were — whether they went so far as to be a threat to the very position of the human race in the scheme of things.

Word had passed around that I was going to talk with the Venusian, and that no one was to enter the ship while I did. That was easy to do. Everyone went outside at some time or other in the space of a day. They were told when they were outside.

When I paused in the gaping hole in the nose of the ship and looked out before entering, every eye was turned in my direction. I waved my arm, smiling at Mary Alice who stood with Rus, Ann, Jo, and Sam Rayburn in a close group where I had just left her, then turned and crossed to the door of the passenger section.

By the time I had opened that door I had managed to get a disheartened, defeated look on my face. And I knew it would be convincing. I was no amateur at the game of playing on people's feelings—Venusians included.

The priest looked at me expressionlessly as I closed the door behind my back and stood there looking at him. His indigo-colored face, a third again as large as a human's, had that peculiar mixture of animal power and human intelligence so characteristic of the Venusian.

A dribble of moisture went from his flat nose down to one corner of his lips. I went up to him and wiped it with some cleansing tissue. His eyes thanked me.

I let my lip curl in bitterness, then turned away abruptly as if

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trying to hide my emotions.

"I guess you've won," I said dully as I took a few steps. I put my knees in the seat three rows ahead of him and rested my arms on the back of the seat, facing him. "By tomorrow," I went on. "We'll be in the storm area. The iceberg will break up. Once that happens —" I shrugged my shoulders expressively.

He looked at me without change of expression. I waited a moment, then rested my chin on my crossed arms and pretended to study something in the seat in front of my eyes.

"Perhaps I could make the end easier for all of you," he said.

Startled, I looked up at him. His face was impassive. I couldn't tell what he meant. And yet I did know, too, from what I knew of Venusian beliefs.

"Sorry," I shook my head. "You ought to know us well enough to know we can't retreat into a dream world and convince ourselves the things around us don't exist." I decided to lead out a low trump and see what happened. Screwing my mouth into a twisted smile I added, seemingly as an afterthought, "I don't mind dying, or even the knowledge that death in a few hours is inevitable. I—just hate to die—with so many things unanswered."

He smiled then. It was a smile of condescension and amused sympathy. I scowled angrily to cover my feeling of triumph. I had struck the right chord.

"You belong to a strange race, Mr. Cripe," he said slowly. "A strange, mad race. That madness drove you across space to our planet—not because you needed to come, but because it was something you hadn't done the year before. Each member of your race darts here and there through life in search of — what? Something that he can hold up triumphantly and exclaim, 'Betcha never heard of this before!' Right now, with death certain, you yourself aren't so much concerned with the fact of death as you are with dying with questions unanswered."

I decided to upset him a little.

"It's a good thing you Venusians aren't afflicted with the same disease," I said, smiling briefly. "With your superior intelligence the human race wouldn't be able to hold its superior position long if you Venusians got ambitions. But that's our safety. You believe our drive and energy are a disease of inferior minds. Therefore you would never allow yourselves to have ambitions to take over."

Before I finished what I was saying he started grinning. He kept on grinning at me, his eyes bright. I began to feel like I did the time I raised a poker pot against a guy that had four aces.

"We have never," he finally said, his voice quivering with pride. "Been in the inferior position as you seem to think."

My heart did a double flipflop against the upholstery of the seat back against which my chest was resting. I forced a mild sneer to my face.

"Boy, do you have a superiority complex," I said mildly. "Sure, you

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managed to get to the Earth so you could ride on a Venus-bound ship and wreck it on the ice continent. But you're a priest. I don't know why you did it, but I gather it's the old reason of having to pay a visit to the ice continent in order to advance in the priesthood. I know about that. *You* got to the Earth, but there probably aren't more than twelve of you priests with the ability to hypnotize people like you have."

"Hypnotize?" he echoed. He opened his mouth like he was going to add something, then closed it. I kept still, waiting. The only sound was the occasional sharp crack of some part of the ship responding to the cold and the gentle rocking of the waves. Finally he spoke again.

"What is reality?" he asked rhetorically. "Does a thing exist when you aren't aware of it?"

"Yeah, yeah," I belittled. "I know. I know all about the Venusian belief that things don't exist when you aren't aware of them. The catch is that little 'for you' in your theory of reality. You Venusians don't believe in a general reality independent of anyone's being aware of it."

"But is a thing always what you think it is?" he said, changing his tactics. "Suppose one little ganglion got switched around? That isn't hypnotism."

I kept my mouth shut. I wanted him to talk.

"I think you had a scientist once who came very close to things," he went on after a while. "He said, 'If things can be explained without presuming the existence of something, why presume its existence?' You humans presume the existence of a non-mental reality as the basis of all your individual realities, and yet such a non-mental reality can never be observed or even detected by a mind—except by theoretical inferences of very shaky character."

"What's that got to do with your assertion that the Venusians have always occupied the superior position?" I shot at him. "Do they, by any chance, control the Earth government? Are there . . ." I decided to come right out, "other Venusians still on the Earth, trying to gain control of the Earth by hypnotizing and controlling those in power?"

His reaction to this shot puzzled me. He seemed to breath a sigh of relief about something. Then his seeming sense of relief changed to amused tolerance.

"Why would we want to control the Earth government?" he asked. "To give us a feeling of superiority at being able to direct your mad ant heap of a civilization?"

What had he been so relieved about? I barely listened to his reply, which, a few short minutes before, I had been most anxious to hear. Had something been said? Had the trend of our conversation been close to something he wanted to conceal? And had I veered to what he considered safer grounds?

A feeling of exasperation rose in me. I felt as if I could almost reach out and contact a lot of things; but I didn't even know what they would be. And I wasn't

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getting anywhere with the Venusian. He was fending my thrusts almost absentmindedly. He was handing me things any book on Venusian culture repeated page after page.

I heard the door open and twisted my head to see who had interrupted my private talk with the priest. It was Sam Rayburn.

"It's getting pretty choppy," he explained his presence. "Rus thinks maybe we'd better all come inside."

He walked down the aisle toward me as he spoke. There was a worried frown on his forehead under his spotless ten gallon hatbrim.

"Yes," I said, watching his approach. "This iceberg might break in two if it gets choppy. Let's go out and tell everybody to come inside."

I was twisting around and bracing myself. Inside I was cold. There was a layer of cold, then underneath I could feel myself cracking again.

I was thinking what the Venusian priest had said about there being no external reality, but only mental reality. I was thinking how insecure our theories of external reality are. I was thinking how even instruments can be wrong.

I was thinking of a trick I had learned in school years ago and wondering if I still remembered it. But most of all I was thinking of Mary Alice — and how nice it would be to watch the flames licking at logs in a fireplace while my head rested on her soft shoulder and her hair pressed against the skin of my forehead.

I saw the toe of my shoe connect with Sam's chin and knew even as it struck that it wasn't enough. I saw the surprised, almost stupidly ludicrous expression of pain on his face.

I wasn't sure. That was the trouble with me. I liked Sam. Maybe I liked him more than anyone I had ever known. And I wasn't sure. I either knew all the answers now or I was crazy. I didn't know which; but I knew that I was doing the right thing in either case.

I saw Sam's hands come up instinctively to catch my leg. I twisted sideways and pulled my leg in, feeling his fingers slide away.

He was too close to try it again. I put my shoulder against him and shoved, praying. He fell into a seat across the aisle. It was my chance to get away. I started to run and stumbled over his leg.

My face scraped against the dirty rubber tile of the aisle. I could hear pounding on the door less than ten feet away from me.

I didn't bother to get on my feet. I got on my hands and knees and crawled.

There were rapid foosteps behind me. I remembered another trick and suddenly scooted backward. Sam's body crashed down on me, knocking out my breath; but he had overshot because of my sudden backtracking.

I got to my feet as Sam began to turn over. I jumped on his back and reached for the doorknob, knowing that if I didn't reach it the first time I never would.

My hand gripped it and turned

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it. I prayed that whoever was outside would have sense enough to pull it open before I had to let go. I felt the smooth metal of the knob slip from my fingers.

My head was resting on something soft. I knew without opening my eyes that it was Mary Alice's shoulder again.

"Here's where I came in," I thought dreamily. I moved my arm and a sharp pain came from my wrist. I opened my eyes.

I let out a long sigh of relief when I saw Sam Rayburn's figure lying in the aisle, his hands tied together behind his back and his legs tied together.

"Hi, baby," I whispered to Mary Alice.

Rus was standing over me. Other people were strung out behind him, and faces were looking at me from the seats along the full length of the aisle.

From the way the place tilted this way and that I knew we were in the thick of the storm belt now —but we were all inside!

"Feel good enough to explain a few things?" Rus asked eagerly.

"Give him a chance to catch his breath," someone said.

"Sure," I heard myself say. I pointed to Sam Rayburn and saw my wrist was swollen. "That's the Venusian priest," I said.

I watched the look of amazed disbelief spread over Rus's face with secret amusement. Then he shook his head.

"Huh, uh," he said with finality. "He's out cold. I can understand how he might hypnotize us all into thinking he looks like Sam Rayburn while's he's conscious, but not when he's out cold. He was working with the Venusian, though. He locked the door when he came in to find out if we could get in out of the storm. He wanted us all to be swept away by the waves. Anyway, if he's the Venusian, what about this indigo-colored giant we have here?" He pointed at the figure imprisoned in the locked shock seat.

"That's Sam Rayburn," I said, grinning.

"Take it easy, Stan," Rus said. He looked worried about me.

"It's the truth," I said, struggling to a sitting position on the floor. I grinned at a sudden thought. "When and if we reach Winkum you'll realize it. You're going to see an amazing number of Sam Rayburns walking around the native quarters of Chicago."

I watched the look of mystification on his face.

"You see," I explained. "The Venusian priest built up a permanent block in all our minds so that whenever we see a Venusian in actuality, the image will shortcircuit over to an image of Sam Rayburn. We all have a hypnotically induced fixation. Maybe an incurable one."

I glanced at the figure of the Venusian sympathetically, knowing that it was really Sam.

"I think it was a sudden impulse that made the Venusian complete the cross so that we thought Sam himself looked like a Venusian," I went on. "It got Sam out of the way, anyway. And unless he was

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hypnotized too he probably has been thinking we are all crazy."

The indigo face remained undisturbed and expressionless. I sighed.

"I guess he's hypnotized," I said. "Anyway, you know what the scheme was now. The real Venusian priest planned on locking us all out on the iceberg when we reached the storm area so we'd be washed off and drown. Then when the ship got within a few miles of the land belt he'd dive off and swim ashore.

"I know the whole scheme now," I continued. "It's the same old desire of the Venusians to drive us away so they can remain in peace. There's been a high percentage of wrecks of space ships lately. They thought they could discourage us and make us give up space travel if they made it costly enough. It may work, too, unless we get out of this alive."

I saw the storm of protests coming from all sides. I held up my hand for silence and shouted down the murmur of voices.

"Maybe you think I'm nuts," I said. "But listen to reason. Sam—if he is Sam—tried to lock you all out. If you want to believe he's what he looks like—Sam Rayburn—that doesn't alter that fact. So make sure he's safely locked in a shock seat before he comes to. Then if we get out of this alive you'll learn whether I was right or not on the other."

"Seems to me maybe *you're* the Venusian," a sharp-nosed woman said suspiciously.

"How did you suspect him?" Rus asked as the woman subsided under a withering glare from Mary Alice. "There wasn't a thing to point to him after we captured the — ah — real Sam Rayburn," he hesitated, glancing doubtfully at the indigo-colored giant imprisoned in the shock seat, who, according to my theory, was really the pink-skinned Texan.

"I didn't," I said. "Not until he had come in and was half-way down the aisle toward me. Then it soaked in that he had flicked the safety lock on the pilot room door as he closed it, locking all of you out. That made me remember something the supposed Venusian had said a minute before. He had said, 'Suppose one little ganglion got switched around? That isn't hypnotism.'

"When I realized Sam had locked all of you out, and was coming down the aisle with the intention of putting me out of the running, and I suddenly remembered what the supposed Venusian had said about switched ganglions, the whole pattern fell into place. I realized it was a case of the dog whose mouth watered when a bell was rung and no meat was around, because the bell had rung when he was fed for so long that the ringing of the bell and watering of the mouth were functionally connected.

"What is the seeing of a person who is familiar to you?" I elaborated. "It is the unlocking of the combination to one single brain cell. It happens in dreams, so that in dreams people and things have every least property of actual reali-

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ty. Sam Rayburn is a person who gets impressed on people's minds when they see him. All of us had a definite brain cell with his brand on it. What the Venusian priest did was twist our neural circuits around so that when we saw him, all the impressions from him — indigo color, height, animal nose, and so forth, unlocked the idea of Sam Rayburn."

"I see what you mean," Rus said, still doubtful.

"He waited until just the right moment," I went on. "The storm was nearly here. In time you might have found a way to open the door —but before you could the waves would be washing in. I was supposed to be unsuspecting. I was supposed to wait until Sam—the Venusian—got close enough to get his hands on me. It almost worked."

Rus looked down at the still unconscious figure of Sam Rayburn on the floor, and shook his head. I could see he still thought I was wrong.

* * *

"Reminds me of Texas," Rus said half jokingly.

I gave Mary Alice a little kiss and set my glass of wine down, and crossed to the window where Rus Tryon stood, his hand parting the curtain.

Outside a procession of lazy Sam Rayburns were strolling along the pavement, their ten gallon grey hats unspotted and undented, their faces pink and healthy.

"But you're convinced now, aren't you?" I asked maliciously.

"Yeah. Yeah. I'm convinced," Rus answered without taking his eyes off the Sam Rayburns. "Only —I'm wondering if Texas will be as bad."

It was twenty-four hours since we had been picked up by a veritable swarm of helicopters from the floating wreckage of the space ship as it sped in mad spirals through the swift currents between Winkum and Nod on its way to the sunward side of Venus.

They had found us by following the direction of the signals Rus sent out on his improvised radio transmitter, and had brought us straight to Chicago, Winkum.

When we arrived I found that the old man had given me up for dead and had already promoted someone else into my place, and the new man was already working on the mystery of Elmer Smith.

I was still chuckling from the conversation I had had with Gregory Janes, my boss. He wasted just four words on my return from the dead. As soon as he was sure it was me he said, "I'm glad you're back."

Then he started telling me to get on the job.

"Just pretend I'm dead yet," I kept repeating. Roughly three hundred dollars of IEI expense money went into those words, repeated monotonously as an answer to every argument and inducement he offered.

In the end I got a raise, a six-month vacation with pay, a bonus for uncovering the scheme of the Venusians to drive us back home to our own planet, and a raise in title to Chief of the Trouble Shooting Department of IEI. I had been

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that anyway all the time, but without a desk or official title.

I gave another look at the Sam Rayburns outside the hotel room window and returned to Mary Alice and gave her another kiss and picked up my glass of wine.

"Just think, honey," I said, glancing carefully at my watch. "It's been two hours and twenty-four minutes since you became Mrs. Stanwoody Cripe."

"In another . . . thirty-six minutes," Mary Alice said, checking my watch carefully. "It will be our third wedding anniversary. We will have been married three hours."

"And no children yet?" Rus mocked dryly from the window. "Cripes!"

The phone chose that moment to interrupt our laughter. I set my glass of wine down again and crossed the rug and lifted the phone from its cradle.

"Mr. Stanwoody Cripes?" a female voice asked eagerly.

"Yeah," I grunted.

"*Earth* is calling, Mr. Cripe," she said importantly. "Just a moment please."

"Nuts," I said, glancing worriedly at Mary Alice.

"Who is it?" Mary Alice asked. "Mr. Janes?"

"I suppose so," I groaned. "He's probably convinced I'm the only one on two worlds that can get at the root of the Elmer Smith mystery—" I looked startled at the phone receiver which I was using to emphasize my words. "But so help me—I—I'll quit before I'll waste a minute of our honeymoon talking to Elmer Smith."

"How long would it take?" Mary Alice asked quietly.

"Couple of weeks, maybe," I said, looking at the toe of my shoe.

"Well . . ." Mary Alice said.

"Listen, Stan, my boy," the old man's voice came pleadingly over the phone.

"Cripes, what a honeymoon," Rus snorted.

"Yeah, GJ?" I answered the voice on the phone. I was still studying the toe of my shoe. After all, when a man eliminates fuel from a power plant, you can't just forget about it, can you?

THE END

SEVEN COME A "LOVIN'"

(Concluded from page 83)

and Ethel again. Suddenly his expression changed. He laughed.

"It certainly did solve everything, Rosey," he said. "It's shown me what a fool I was to take Ethel seriously. Everything's worked out fine."

"Rosey," Seven murmured. "You used to call me that years ago. Many's the time I've thought of that."

"What do you mean, years ago?" Jud said, taking Seven's arm and pulling him through the crowd toward the exit and the corridor leading to the salon. "It was just six or seven hours ago. How about another cheese sandwich for me? I didn't eat all of my lunch."

THE END

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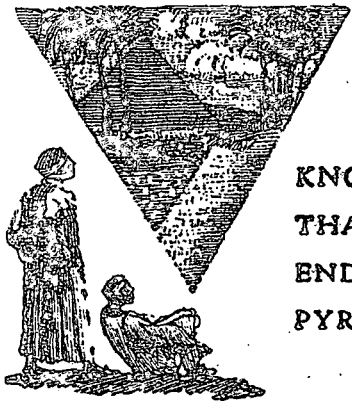

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NEWS OF THE MONTH

Latest reports on what our readers are doing. Fan clubs, social events and personalities in the limelight.

SIMULTANEOUSLY with the appearance on the stands of OTHER WORLDS, science fiction fandom holds its annual World Science Fiction Convention in Cincinnati, Ohio, on September 3-4-5. OTHER WORLDS salutes this enthusiastic and earnest group of science fiction readers, which has been holding these conventions since 1940, some of its members crossing the entire continent to attend, and even coming from other continents. This time the convention is being held at the Hotel Metropole, its headquarters. Finances are managed through membership, plus auctions of covers and interior illustrations from science fiction magazines. Prominent in the auction will be the cover and interior illustrations from this first issue of OTHER WORLDS, and bidding for the prized "first issue" cover is expected to be spirited.

JACK WILLIAMSON, one of the earliest and steadiest science fiction writers, is bringing out an anthology of his stories in book form. Publication date will be announced in "News Of The Month."

ROG PHILLIPS, who is rapidly being rated one of the top science fiction writers of today, is at work on a stupendous science fiction novel which he hints will contain an absolutely new concept, and which will arouse a storm of controversy. It will not appear in magazine form, he says, but is intended as a challenging first novel.

SCIENCE FICTION has attracted the attention of the movies in a big way. Big producers are scanning story material with great interest, and according to Publisher's Weekly, this new type of story is destined for a wave of popularity which may eclipse the westerns.

WATCH THIS COLUMN for all the latest news. There'll be a lot more next time.

PERSONALS

THIS COLUMN is for your convenience. Do you want penpals? Would you like to locate back issues of your favorite science fiction magazines? Have you lost contact with a science fiction acquaintance of years ago? Have you back copies to sell? Have you fan business propositions to make to possible partners? Have you an unanswered question regarding matters pertaining to science fiction? Do you wish to locate other science fiction readers in your city, in order to form a club? If so, then this is your chance to get the necessary publicity to accomplish what you wish to do. Merely state your desire in as few words as possible, and address it to "Personals" in care of this magazine, 1144 Ashland Avenue, Evanston, Illinois, and it will be printed in the next issue to go to press.

BACK COPIES FATE magazine, Volume 1, Number 2, wanted. Address Robert N. Webster, FATE Magazine, 1144 Ashland Avenue, Evanston, Illinois.

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OTHER WORLDS BOOK SHOP

The following specially-selected science fiction books have been picked by the editors of OTHER WORLDS for their excellence, and they are now available to our readers through our new book service. You can buy them directly from OTHER WORLDS. Use the handy coupon.

1. **WHO GOES THERE?** By *John W. Campbell.* These are the sensational stories by the famous editor of *Astounding Science Fiction* that shook the science fiction world. In addition to the title story, the book contains six others, including such classics as *Blindness, Elimination, Twilight* and the famous *Night.* $3.00

2. **THE WORLD BELOW** By *S. Fowler Wright.* England's greatest science fiction novel, a story of the world a half-million years from now. $3.50

3. **SIDEWISE IN TIME** By *Murray Leinster.* A collection of *Post* writer Leinster's most vivid stories, including *Proxima Centauri,* a tale of interplanetary adventure; *A Logic Named Joe,* a super-calculating machine gone delightfully berserk; *The Fourth Dimensional Demonstrator;* and *De Profundis,* sea serpents who doubt the existence of man. $3.00

4. **SLAVES OF SLEEP** By *L. Ron Hubbard.* About Jan Palmer, who lives in two worlds, one while he sleeps—a strange world parallel to our own where magic holds sway and demons rule ensorcelled humans. $3.00

5. **EDISON'S CONQUEST OF MARS** By *Garrett P. Serviss.* A smashing tale of an invasion from Mars, and the gallant counter invasion by Earthmen. The best novel from the pen of the immortal Serviss. $3.50

6. **THE WHEELS OF IF** By *L. Sprague DeCamp.* The "laugh man" of science fiction tells his most rib-tickling science stories, including *The Gnarly Man,* an immortal Neanderthal pursued by a man-crazy female anthropologist and a glory-mad surgeon; *The Warrior Race,* conquest bent, and instead seduced by a wanton world; and many others. $3.00

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Send me the following books (circled numbers) by return mail, postpaid:

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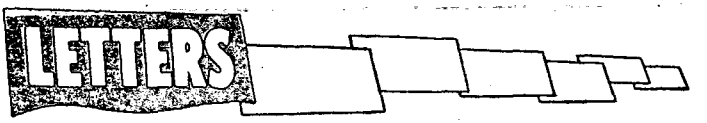

G. H. IRWIN

I was very pleased to receive your letter regarding your new magazine. You may be sure I sat right down to begin work on the story you requested. Since you asked me for a title, to use on the cover, I have been "on the spot." I've an aversion to writing "around a title" but if it must be . . .

"Where No Foot Walks" occurs to me to be a title that could mean anything . . . or nothing! I'll try to make a sensible story around it. It could be that a place where no foot walks is a place where they just don't have feet. And if not feet, what would it be . . .

You'll pardon me if I must break this letter off. I've got to follow up that idea before it escapes me. Maybe the darn things are bats . . .

Thanks, Gerald. We'll let the readers be the judge of how well you responded to our request. "Where No Foot Walks" is not only a good title, but it fits the story extremely well.—R. N. W.

★ ★ ★

ROG PHILLIPS

Naturally I have a story you can use in your new magazine. As a matter of fact, I have one already finished, written just for you. Yes, I said for you. Your new magazine is no surprise to me. Mathematically, the chances for a new science fiction magazine at this time are almost impossible to ignore. Late in 1947 I began a series of calculations based on increased reader interest in science fiction, the increased cost of printing and paper, the incidence of strikes in the typesetting trades, and the shaky position of several pulp magazine companies, and these factors formed an equation which indicated that on September 1, 1949, a new magazine having eleven letters in its name, containing 160 pages, and 72,158 words and selling for 50c must inevitably be published by an aggressive new publishing company.

By the way, my story, which is enclosed, is based on the element of chance becoming 100% in a given instance; the concept that inevitably someone must be born who can guess what is going to happen *every time*. I hope you'll like it.

We are sorry to report, Mr. Phillips, that your mathematics do not impress us. Your prediction that OTHER WORLDS would sell for 50c is incorrect. The correct price is 35c; arrived at by a more accurate procedure than your faulty mathematical theories . . . we conducted a poll among average science fiction readers to determine what they thought a really good science fiction magazine should be sold for, to allow its publisher to give them the finest quality and craftsmanship. However, your story does impress us, and we think it will impress the readers of OTHER WORLDS. And don't kid us—Sam Merwin rejected your story before we wrote you! You see, we, too, have a way of knowing things. We also know Sam was wrong!—R. N. W.

★ ★ ★

TRADE PRESS TYPOGRAPHERS

Our check shows that dummy pages 1, 2, 3, 71, 84, 119, 157, 158, 159, 160 are missing, but we will expect these next week. We are going ahead with the make-up on the basis of the page size being 26½ x 41½ picas including the running head. Will you please confirm this?

You are quite correct about the page size. And you will get the missing pages of OTHER WORLDS next week . . .

And where did you readers think we'd get fan letters to print for the first issue? We've got to fill this with something, don't we? By the way, Mr. C. S. Lee, of Trade Press Typographers, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, is responsible for the extremely readable and bold type face used in OTHER WORLDS. He is also responsible for the fine job of makeup.—R. N. W.

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YOUR FUTURE
READING PLEASURE

Now that you've read the first issue of OTHER WORLDS, you don't want to miss any of the following issues. Just to give you a hint of the treats in store for you, we'll list a few of them.

1. THIS TIME . . .

By Rog Phillips. Here's a brand new story by a top-notch author. It's a story of the post-atom-war period, when man has another chance. And this time . . . it will be different!

2. PROJECT PILWEE

By J. B. Stuart. Patriots have always played a great part in history. But here is a new kind of patriot, against a grand scale of future history. It is a staggering novel.

3. SONS OF THE SERPENT

By Wes Amberst. Was the earth always inhabited by human beings? Is it true, as legend says, that the serpent once built a great civilization? A profound tale based on legend.

4. THE JUSTICE OF MARTIN BRAND

By G. H. Irwin. Executed as a traitor, Martin Brand's coffin was enshrined as a hero. Then a woman in love did a strange thing—she opened the shrine . . . and war flared across three worlds!

5. KINGDOM OF THE GODS

By Richard S. Shaver. A tremendous new tale from the thought records of the dead race who once inhabited the lost caverns of the earth. Beginning a brand new series of the world's most imaginative and stimulating stories.

6. THE BOOK OF SETHANTES

First of an historical series, detailing the history of the earth from 78152 B.C. A dramatic modernization of one of the greatest books of all time. Truly one of the greatest things you have ever read.

THESE AND MANY OTHER STORIES WILL APPEAR IN FUTURE ISSUES OF

OTHER WORLDS

January Issue On Sale November 1

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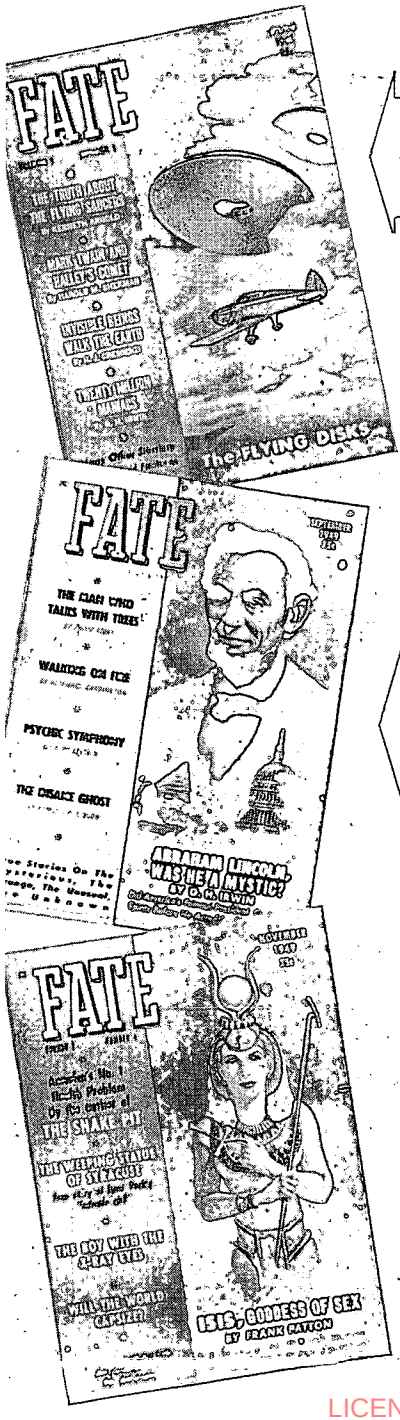

HAVE YOU EVER SEEN A FLYING DISK ?

Do you wonder if there is life on Mars? What is the truth about Spiritualism? Is there really a life after death? What new discoveries are being made by scientists about mental telepathy—ghosts—other planets—insanity—extra-sensory-perception—forecasting the future? What do people really believe in, but are afraid to admit because of fear of ridicule or even worse? Do the stars really determine your future? What is a mystic? What secrets lie in Tibet—in Big Business—in Russia? Where did Man really come from? Have you ever attended a seance? Do dreams really mean something?

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